TEN COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

FAMOUS WESTERN

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

JUNE 15¢

2 FEATURE NOVELS

BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

by Eli Colter

HANGMEN OF HOLY HOLLOW

by George Kilrain

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June, 1949

FAMOUS WESTERN

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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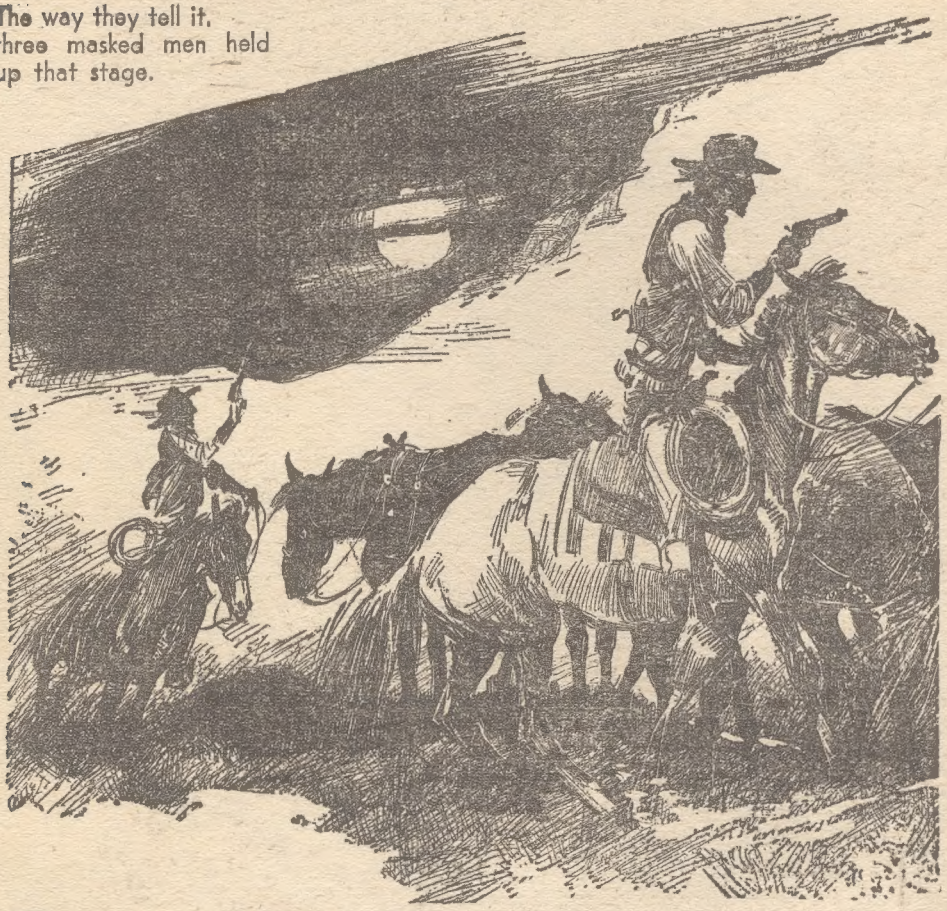
Blind Man's Bluff

The way they tell it, three masked men held up that stage.



Vengeance-Trail Novel

by ELI COLTER

(author of "Boothill Waits For Sundown")

Bitterer than the knowledge that his father had died in prison, was George Slade's discovery that well-meaning men had unwittingly aided the unknown plotters who had framed Ira Slade, aided them by not telling of a few trivialities which hid the truth. And now, the plotters had a new victim picked and ready . . .

GEORGE SLADE pushed open the swing doors, stepped inside, stopped and stood motionless. His tall, black-garbed figure was filmed with dust; dust darkened his blond hair and streaked his tired face. His features had lost their fresh look of youth in these past twelve months; he had put on a dozen years in the last ten days. It seemed a long time he had been away.

The big room had gone very still. Behind the bar, gaunt-bodied Cass

Queen gently set down the whiskey bottle he had just opened. At the end of the bar Rink Zankery leaned, his genial sun-leathered visage concerned, his intense blue eyes waiting and anxious. At the bar, at the gaming tables, at the various customers—especially Sam Wright—were quite as openly concerned, as silently waiting.

Only one man moved. Mingo Toomey, for seven years now the house man at the *Black Jack*—the only square gambler a good many men in Salt Lick had ever known—started to move forward, a hand half raised in greeting. He did not look toward Zankery, but the immobility of the whole room caught him. He too went still, slowly lowering his hand.

In that blanket of silence, that concentrated regard eloquent with an almost embarrassing welcome, with a grim championship none of these men could put into words, George Slade forced his reluctant feet on—not toward the bar, but along the wall. Thirty pairs of eyes watched him, helpless. He stopped before a document draped with crepe. The crepe was faded and dusty now; a

year ago it had been black and clean. A muscle bunched in George's jaw as he read the familiar lines and remembered tough old Billy Harkness, because of whom his father, Ira Slade, and his brother, Barry Slade, had died.

The yellowing document read:

To whom it may concern:

This is to certify that Rink Zankery has on this day loaned me the sum of $26,000 bucks. As security for so generous a loan I hereby make him silent partner in my beloved Saloon, which is to become his sole property in case it ever proves impossible for me to pay back his loan..

Signed....Bill Harkness
Witness...Cass Queen

Slade turned away, his dirt-streaked features blank of all expression. He went toward the bar, stopped and stood there, looking around at familiar faces, still stripped bare of speech, of even the impulse to bring sound out of his throat.

Queen wordlessly shoved toward him the opened bottle and a clean glass. Toomey stood at his elbow and raised a hand to grip the boy's shoulder, saying nothing. Sam Wright smiled a little diffidently and took a step toward him.

Rink Zankery spoke the first word, his heavy voice subdued. "You needn't say anything, son; we heard. You just get back?"

George nodded, and reached for the whiskey bottle.

"You on your way after Dave Holly, boy?" Toomey asked.

"Yeah."

Sam Wright said, "You want any help? Every damn man here—"

George cut in, "I'll go alone; I owe Dad and Barry that. Holly put the bullets in 'em."

Wright protested, "You better take some of us along, boy.

Dave shoots in the back. At least, let me'n Mingo—"

George said shortly, "I'll go alone. Thanks—but—I'll go alone. He emptied a second glass of whiskey.

THE SILENCE, the immobility, held sway again. Most of them had known George Slade all his life, these men gathered about him. They had known his father, his mother and his brother, as they had known the girl he loved, Kit O'Hara, and Kit's mother, black-haired acid-tongued old Mag, as they had known the wide lands of the Slade home acres, the Quarter-Circle-Star. They did not like the picture they were seeing in their minds' eye, of young Slade prone, a bullet hole between his shoulder blades.

Sam Wright—whose holdings were just over Star Hill from the Slade place—cleared his throat and made another try. "Listen, kid; you won't have a dog's chance with that treacherous son."

Slade wheeled from the bar. It's no use talking, Sam. It's my fight; I'll still take it alone."

He went out through a silence as profound as that in which he had entered, his black figure like a shadow moving toward the swing doors. The late sun, slanting through the front windows, gleamed on the mica-flecked dust powdering his shoulders, on the falling specks of sawdust kicked up by his lifting heels.

The doors shut behind him. They saw him rise to the saddle on the rangy long-legged sorrel they knew, heard the horse's hoofs beat a retreat beyond their sight.

The silence shattered. Sam Wright brought his hand flat down on the bar. "By Judas, I'm goin' after him! We've had enough killin' out of Dave Holly! He shot Ira and Barry just because he wanted all the loot himself, plugged Billy Harkness and Joe Willoughby just because they'd have seen him from the stage and could identify him. He ain't goin' to add George to his list. I'm goin' after that kid—"

Rink Zankery's voice was not subdued now. It rattled the windows. "You'll stay right where you are, Sam Wright. That boy's took enough, and I reckon this is his show. He told us to keep out, and we're doing as he asks. Have you forgot that Mike Dillon and all the rest of the

boys are still right there on the Quarter-Circle-Star to side him?"

Wright subsided. "I guess I was forgettin' that for the minute, Rink. You're right, as usual; we'll stay out, till he calls us in."

Mingo Toomey said soberly, "If only he doesn't call too late."

THE DUSK was deepening into night as Slade rode the sorrel down the lane and turned into the barn yard. He stepped from the saddle, dropped the reins over the horse's head to the ground, and started across the yard toward the back porch of the big house.

The light in the kitchen window was a defiant challenge. He wondered if Dave Holly really could still be there. Would Dave have the sheer cold nerve to dare still be there? Was the light in the window a leering bluff, and Dave warned and gone long ago?

George stopped at the foot of the porch steps, listening, his right hand mechanically resting on the butt of the gun in his holster; no sound came from inside. George went swiftly up the treads, crossed the porch, flung open the door, and walked boldly into the familiar room.

Dave Holly was still there. He was over against the wall, across the kitchen, facing Slade, gagged, bound, and tied into a chair. He was a thin man, a little over medium height, good-looking in a gaunt, rugged fashion. Holly wasn't very good-looking at the moment; his graying hair disheveled, his face battered and bloody. He had been severely beaten not too long since. Pinned to his breast was a scrap of paper with writing on it. The roughly printed words were large. George could read them easily from where he stood.

Here he is waiting for you, George—the rat who killed your big brother and framed your old man into the pen. Nobody will ever ask what you did with him. We believe in justice.

The Vigilantes.

Holly sat hunched in his bonds. He had never been a coward at any time in his forty-five years, but there was undisguised terror in his straining eyes now, eyes half closed by the puffing flesh around them. Holly knew well, as everyone on Salt Lick Range knew, how Slade had revered old Ira and the older boy Barry. He knew how stunned George had been by the tragedy, how wildly George had sworn vengeance and vowed to get back the Quarter-Circle-Star, the ranch that had been owned by Slades for three generations, that was now legal and legitimate property of Dave Holly.

Everyone on the range knew also how, ten days ago, the prison authorities had sent for George, saying that the old man was dying: knew that the old man had died swearing it was Dave Holly who had framed the robbery evidence on him and killed Barry: knew that Slade was returning to the Salt Lick Range today

As he stood there, looking down into Holly's battered face, George suddenly knew a few things himself. He knew that Dave fully expected to die within the next few minutes, knew that the terror in Holly's eyes was not craven, yellow—it was rebellious! As men often do in moments of terror show upon their faces some desperate emotion from deep within, some emotion that cannot possibly be any dissembling, so now such an emotion claimed all of Holly's bruised and bloody features.

George stared, mouth half open, locked into immobility by sheer incredulity. Then the moment of incredulity was gone, and he knew. Not from any man's tongue would he have believed what he read in Dave Holly's face. He could believe what he saw with his own eyes.

"I know!" He whipped the gag from Holly's mouth and bent over him. "I know. *You didn't do it.*

"No," Holly whispered with dry lips. "No, son. I didn't do it."

George started untying the bonds. "The old man thought it was you. But it was *somebody else*, framing *you.*"

"That's right."

"Somebody dressed in your clothes," George said slowly, "riding your horse. And, of course, you've always known it."

"That's right, boy."

"How did you know?"

"Why, how could I help but know? My horse was gone that night; my clothes had been taken. They was all brought back in the mornin' before I got up. The horse was caked with dried sweat and mud, the mackinaw and shirt dirty and bloody."

"What did you do with 'em, Dave?"

"Burned the clothes, son. Cleaned up my horse and sold him to a drifter bound for Mexico." Holly flexed his cramped arms and legs as George removed the last thing. "Ever since then, every hour, every day, I've been expectin' your old man to bust out and accuse me. Why didn't he ever do it before? Why did he say at the trial that he didn't know who done it? Why did he break down now, at the end, and blurt out what he thought was the truth?"

SLADE DROPPED wearily into the nearest kitchen chair, and rubbed a hand across his forehead. "He knew the state I was in, Dave, knew if he told then, I'd sure go on the prod after you, get into trouble and maybe get myself killed. He figured the sheriff would catch up with you, with the one bandit who—supposedly—got away."

"He told you that?"

"Yeah. But when he realized he was dying, figuring I'd cooled down enough now to leave it to the law, he thought the law ought to know the bandit was you."

"Being as the law hadn't caught up with the fella in a year now," Holly said, "and it had begun to look as if they never would."

"Yeah."

"What'd the old man die of, George?"

"The chest wounds he got that night of the hold-up, coupled with pneumonia. The blood on your shirt was Barry's blood, Dave; it's on some man's hands. And now the old man's life is on that fellow's hands too."

"If it hadn't been for the old wounds, the old man would have pulled through?"

"Yeah. The prison doc said so. And I'd have had a chance to clear him and get him out of there."

Slade sat silent, remembering the night of the robbery, when the incoming stage had been held up by three masked men. The masked men had gotten the box of money off the stage. Then there had been a gun battle, two of the bandits had dropped, the third had ridden off, the stage had raced away. Harkness and Willoughby, passengers in the stage, had been shot to death, the stage driver and the guard wounded badly. In the morning, the sheriff and his posse had found two masked men lying in the brush at the scene of the holdup; Barry Slade, dead, and old Ira Slade unconscious but still alive.

Later, Ira Slade had told a wild story. He had, he said, been going home from town with Barry, neither of them armed. A masked man had held them up, forced them at the point of the gun to ride to the scene of the holdup, then had shot them down from behind, after ordering them to turn their backs to him. That was the last the old man had remembered until he regained consciousness in the sheriff's office. Nobody had ever believed that story, but George—and Kit O'Hara.

HOLLY'S voice drew George back to the present. "But now, dying, Ira admitted that he'd seen enough that night to recognize my black and yellow striped shirt, my black and white plaid mackinaw, and my blaze-face black with the four white stockings."

Slade said, "It's a good thing you were wise enough to burn the clothes and get rid of the horse."

Holly smiled thinly. "After word had already got all over town what had happened, when the stage came in? Hell, son! The minute I found that mackinaw and shirt, stuffed under my bunk, and got a look at my horse, I knew what the score was. I'd been pretty drunk the night before;

I was sleeping it off. I wasn't supposed to discover them things—the sheriff was, when he went combing the town buildings and houses for possible clews."

"And there wasn't another man around Salt Lick who wore a black and white plaid mackinaw, or a striped shirt like that one. There wasn't another black marked like yours on Salt Lick Range." George got to his feet and started pacing restlessly. "Who did that to you, tonight, Dave? Beat you up, tied you in that chair and gagged you?"

"I don't know, boy. They wore kerchiefs over their faces, just had holes in 'em for eyes. Only two of them spoke; I didn't know their voices." He added with a wry smile, "Or their clothes."

"How many of them were there?"

"Six. They said you'd be coming after me, hog-wild, said they were going to fix me so I couldn't run."

"And you put up a fight."

"That I did. Don't I look like it?"

"Slightly. Were you going to run, Dave?"

"Hell, yes!"

"From me, or the sheriff?"

"Both. What chance would I have, once I was jailed, with your old man spilling that kind of evidence against me? How many men do you think would be ready to swear that I never wore that mackinaw or shirt since that night?"

Slade whistled under his breath. "Half of Salt Lick. I could swear it myself—now that my attention has been called to it."

"You and everybody else," Holly said grimly. "They've got me in a tight. I was going to duck and lie low until you cooled off, or some evidence could be dug up in my favor. The news had only just got around, via the party line; I was all ready to make a fast getaway when them six birds busted in on me."

"And one of those six buzzards,or more, killed Barry and the old man and robbed the stage," George said. "You realize that, don't you? Nobody else would have been that much interested in seeing me drill a couple of holes in you." He stopped and stood thinking, an odd expression growing on his face.

Holly said, "What's bitin' you?"

"I was just thinkin', Dave. My horse was tired; I took it pretty slow, coming out. Six men from town, with fresh horses, could have circled me and got here ahead of me, easy."

He was recalling with sharp clarity Sam Wright's insistent argument that he needed help to go after Dave Holly. Only too easily, Sam could have slipped out of the saloon, with five other men, and hit for the Quarter-Circle-Star. Rink Zankery and Mongo Toomey would have had no chance to stop them, once the men had gone out of the *Black Jack's* swing doors.

Holly said, "Sure. They could have. And where does that get us? I still have to hide; the sheriff will be after me pronto. It's funny he hasn't shown up before this."

SLADE TURNED to face him, eyes gone hard. "No. You're not going to run, Dave. The best place for you to hide is in the county jail with Jim Lander keeping guard over you. And that's where you're going; that's where we're both going—straight to Sheriff Lander for you to give yourself up."

Holly jerked himself erect, almost spilling out of his chair. "Like hell I am! I wouldn't have a chance."

"You will after I get through talking to Jim Lander. Leave that to me; you'll hole up safe in a cell and let those buzzards think they've gotten away with it. And while Sheriff Lander is taking everybody's attention with his monkeyshines, I'll be tracking down the polecats that tried to frame you."

Holly stared, suspicion flashing into his eyes. "I don't like this, George. What are you trying to pull?"

George looked back at him steadily. "How do you come to own this ranch, Dave? Why did I put it on the block, holding it so dirt-cheap that it would have to sell quick? Why was I ready to let some other man buy everything I owned, lock,

stock and barrel, at half its worth? Why was I willing to give up everything right when Kit and I were going to be married?"

Holly said slowly, "To lay your hands on some ready cash to fight the case for your old man. And your expensive lawyer spent it all for you, and lost the case—he didn't have a chance, either. I see what you mean."

George said, "And do you think I'm going to take it lying down now? Let my father and my brother go unavenged? Let another innocent man suffer for the crime? Let the real killers go riding around the country Scot free?"

Holly said, "No. No, I guess not. But what can you *do?*"

"I don't know, till I get started. But they'll never hang you for something you didn't do, Dave—believe me!"

Holly sighed wearily. "Okay. I guess it's the best cover-up you could have to work behind, at that. All right, son; I'll go with you to the sheriff."

2

AS THEY WENT out of the house and started down the steps, and George Slade caught the glimmer of bunkhouse lights through the branches of the cottonwood grove. An odd thing occurred to him then, a thing that caused his skin to crawl and raised the hairs on the back of his neck. The bunkhouse in the cottonwoods; six cowboys in the bunkhouse.

He remembered what Mike Dillon, the foreman, had said to him when the Quarter-Circle-Star had passed into Dave Holly's hands. "I guess we'll just stay on, George. Not that we've any particular likin' for Dave Holly but all of us been here a long time. The Quarter-Circle-Star is home. I guess we'll just hang around and keep an eye on the ranch."

George followed Holly down the steps and across the yard, his gaze lingering on the lighted windows in the grove. How did it happen that the boys hadn't heard the racket in the kitchen? Could it be possible they hadn't heard? And if they had heard, why hadn't they come rushing to Holly's assistance? Six cowboys. Six "Vigilantes". They might have done a thing like that; you wouldn't hear them using the word loyalty, but they knew what it meant. Still, how could that be the answer? Holly would have known the voices of his own men.

George was frowning as he went into the barn with Holly to saddle another horse. Something was haywire somewhere; but he wouldn't go out to the bunkhouse and face the boys down, not yet. He could hear Mike Dillon's bull roar of laughter, the nostalgic twang of Skeet's jew's-harp. He turned his face away. No, not yet. Get Dave Holly safe in a cell first.

Half an hour later Slade and Dave Holly rode down the trail toward the town of Salt Lick together. Less than a mile away from the ranch they met Sheriff Lander on his way to the Quarter-Circle-Star to pick up Holly. The moon was high now, there was plenty of light for them to see one another.

Jim Lander was a tall, slope-shouldered man with a barrel chest and a melon belly. His thick hair and bushy brows formed sharp white contrast to his red face. His shrewd gray eyes habitually wore a deceptive look of indolent inattention. He drawled mildly, he spoke always as if he were afraid of waking somebody asleep a few feet distant.

His gaze played between George and Dave Holly as they drew rein confronting him. "Well, what you won't see when you ain't got a gun. Holly and George ridin' along like old tillicums. I'd of been here before, only I was out of town when the news broke."

George said, "We were on our way to town, Jim; Holly's coming in to give himself up."

If there was any surprise on Lander's face, it failed to show in the moonlight. He said in his hushed

voice, "Fair enough. Pretty damn smart, too. We ain't never had a mob in Salt Lick yet; this has allus been pretty peaceable country. But—we ain't never had a killin' like this in Salt Lick before, neither. Everybody's been pretty bad worked up over it. However—we can talk when we git to my office."

IT WAS nearly an hour later when they rode the back alleys of Salt Lick to the combined sheriff's office and two-cell jail. Lander led the way in, lighted the big lamp over his desk, and pulled down the old green blinds over the windows.

Then he turned to face the other two, and let his gaze wander lazily over Holly's assorted cuts and bruises. "I-gonnies, it looks as if George had a little trouble persuadin' you, Dave."

George said, "I didn't do that, Jim. Sit down, and let me talk for a few minutes."

Lander sat down on the edge of his desk and listened as Slade told all he knew, repeated all Holly had told him. He took the note that had been pinned to Holly's chest out of his pocket and laid it down on the desk top.

Lander read it without touching it, then looked up at Holly. "I-gonnies, Dave, this here sure is a mixed-up mess. What's your idea, George?"

Slade said, "It's plain as a haddock on a hook, isn't it, Jim? Three men held up the stage, one of them wearing Dave's shirt and mackinaw and riding Dave's horse. When the gun battle broke, two of them fell, according to pre-arranged plan, neither of them hurt. After the stage drove off, those two simply got up and rode away."

Lander said dryly, "Then the third one rid on, held up Barry and your old man, herded 'em up there where the stage was held up, plugged 'em in the back to make it look as if they was shot tryin' to get away, put masks on 'em, and rid off to jine the other two. You reelly believe all this, George?"

George said, "I have to believe it; I have to believe what Dave says. You have to keep Dave in a cell, and stall along with the trial and give me a chance to prove the truth."

Lander raised one hand and rubbed the lobe of his right ear. "Oh, I have, have I?"

"Yes. You see, Jim, Dad told me something he never told the warden or the prison doc."

"Yeah? What was that?"

"That he couldn't be *sure* it was Dave that night. That even though the fellow was wearing Dave's clothes and riding Dave's horse, somehow he felt a mortal doubt of it's really being Dave; that's the real reason he never mentioned it before." George kept his gaze on Lander, wondering if anything that thin would go down with the sheriff, wondering if Dave would guess that he lied.

Lander said, gently, "Why bring it up now, then?"

"Well, it could be a clew to the real killer, couldn't it, Jim? That was what Dad thought; it had to be a man about Dave's size and build."

"Not necessarily, George. The man was on a horse; it was night; your old man was bad excited. A mackinaw ain't form-fittin' as you might say; could have been a man three sizes larger than Dave—but not smaller, I-gonnies! Not smaller. Ira would of noticed that."

"Dad didn't want the bandits to go free, Jim. *He* knew *none* of the three had been caught yet."

LANDER RUBBED a hand along his jaw thoughtfully. "I-gonnies, boy, you're gettin' me all mixed up. All along it's looked so dang clear that Ira and Barry and one other man held up the stage, looked like it couldn't be no other way. When the news busted this afternoon, it looked just as clear that Ira had finally give in and squealed on the third man. I still can't see it no other way. I don't blame you none for believin' the old man's yarn; but it just don't make no sense, George—"

Slade said, "You're just too stubborn to try to see anything else! Simply because sombody swiped Dave's clothes and horse—"

Lander interrupted, "And Dave was damn fast about burnin' them clothes and gettin' rid of the horse, hopin' nobody would notice it, accordin' to his own tell. If that ain't the action of a guilty man, what is?"

"I told you why he did that!" George said hotly. "He'd heard about the robbery; he knew what would happen to him if those bloody things were found in his cabin. Look here, Jim. How did that so-called pay-roll money off the stage get into Dad's and Barry's pockets if they were shot down at the hold-up? They'd have had no chance to divide the loot yet."

Lander said, "Well, you remember what Ira said: he didn't know how it got there, said he'd never carried four thousand dollars on him thataway in his life, it must have been planted on him and Barry by the man that shot 'em. Sounded as loco as all the rest of it, son. The robbers would of had more sense than to do a thing like that, seein' as the third man had rid off with the money box before Ira and Barry was shot down. I-gonnies, George. I guess I better tell you where that money come from."

George stared. "You know?"

"Sure I know."

"Why didn't it come out at the trial then?"

"Hell, boy, it didn't need to. I was conductin' that trial, wasn't I. Jury convicted Ira without evidence. I didn't see no need of mentionin' it. I knowed; that was enough; that money was took off Bill Harkness; he was always packin' a wad."

"And the money on Barry?"

"Was took off Willoughby. Billy Harkness said so. He told Finn Lee, and Finn told me. I told Finn to keep his mouth shut about it. Willoughby was instantly killed; Billy lived almost till they got in to Salt Lick. Finn stopped the stage to see if there was anything he could do for the passengers, and that's when Billy told him. The other two robbed him and Willoughby, he said, while the third man covered the stage with his gun. The third man had the money box. There ain't no use arguin' boy: Ira and Dave and Barry is all guilty as hell."

Holly had been sitting by the desk, listening silently, saying many things with his eyes. Now he edged into the conversation. "Sheriff Lander; I realize I'm still pretty much of a stranger here, bein' as I come to Salt Lick Range only about six weeks before the stage robbery."

"Wha'd you come for?" Lander put in softly.

"To buy myself a ranch here because I liked the territory, and later found the Quarter-Circle-Star beggin' for a taker. And, stranger or no, seeing I'm so vitally concerned in this, I'd like to say something here."

"Yeah? Well, say on, Dave."

"I'd just like to say this, to go on record sayin' it. I never had a thing to do with that robbery. I'll take my oath on the Bible, if you like—and I respect the Bible."

"So do I." Lander leaned to slide open a drawer of his desk. He took out a good-sized Morocco-bound Bible and laid it before Holly. "Let's see you do it." He stood there staring at Dave, and his indolent seeming eyes had changed, held something deep and hard and menacingly challenging.

Holly rose, laid his right hand palm down on the pebbled black leather, and looked steadily into Lander's unwinking gaze. "I swear before my God that I had nothing to do with the robbery in which Ira and Barry Slade were shot." He removed his hand and dropped it to his side.

LANDER SHOOK his head, reaching slowly to return the Bible to its drawer, his regard still intent on Holly. "I-gonnies, that beats me. I don't know; I've watched a hell's mint of men takin' oaths, good men and bad. I always thought I could read a man's face. Now—I don't know; I reckon I got to give you the benefit of the doubt, Dave, till you're proved a liar. When a man swears before his God—"

Holly said, "That money taken off the stage, Sheriff, that forty thousand is mine and ranch payroll money."

Lander said, "I know. It's never been found, Dave; never a trace of

it nowhere."

Holly said, "I know where it is. I've known for three days."

Lander's sleepy eyes almost closed. "Yeah? The hell! Where is it?"

"Buried under the saddle-room floor, in the barn, on the Quarter-Circle-Star."

George sucked in his breath. "In our barn! How'd you find it?"

"I seen a little heap of dry dirt on the floor, where none had oughtto be. It had rained that day, the outside ground was all wet. I thought that was funny. I started lookin', and come across a loose board pried it up, and dug around a little. Buried under there in the dirt was the stage money box. Somebody'd been gettin' into it. I didn't even open it; I left it right there the way I found it."

Lander asked, "And why didn't you come in and tell me?"

"I was waitin' to see if Ira Slade would give out anything more before he died."

Lander pursed his lips dubiously. "Mmmmm. Could be. Well, I'll tell you, George; I'll put Dave in a cell. I ain't sayin' I believe him, and I ain't sayin' I ain't. I've seen other men swear before their God, believed 'em, and found out they was lyin'. I can't be too fast about believin' now. But I will do this; I'll give you a chance to unearth some proof. I'll give you one week."

Dave said, "How do ou think he's going to dig up in a week what you couldn't dig up in a year?"

Lander said, "I—gonnies, man, I don't know. But you got to reckon with this: I allus believed on the evidence that Ira and Barry had to be guilty. I'm just a plain man; I got my faults and maybe I wasn't lookin' the right way. George believes you and Ira and Barry is all innocent. He'll go lookin' a different way. And I'll back him; if he runs into anything. I'll be sidin' him shoulder to shoulder. And I'll keep right on lookin', too. That's all I can do."

"But, only a week!" Holly protested.

"I know! But that's about all I'm goin' to have myself, Dave. I—gonnies, do I have to remind you again that this whole range is still all het up over this killin', if I stall the trial off more'n a week, lookin' for further evidence when everybody believes I've got all the evidence any man needs, I'm goin' to have a mob on my hands. They'll bust down the doors and hang you higher'n a kite, and I won't have a chance to stop 'em. I'll have my work cut out for me holdin' 'em quiet for a week. I still don't see how you *can* be tellin' the truth, don't see how George can find any contrary evidence. And if he don't I got to hold you guilty, Dave. That's my last word."

Slade turned away. His last word was for Holly. "Keep your chin up, Dave. I got you into this, when you might have skinned out and laid low and saved yourself. I'll do something. I don't know how, but I'll do something. I tell you again, you'll never hang for a crime you didn't commit."

Lander said to his back, before he could open the door, "Wait outside for me, George. I'll lock Dave up, then we'll scoot out to the ranch and get that money box, before anyone knows I got Dave here. Be with you in a minute."

They rode out to the Quarter-Circle-Star, and found the money box exactly where Dave Holly said it was. The money box was empty. Lander took it with him. Together, in almost total silence, the two men rode back to Salt Lick.

3

SLADE went on alone up the one main street of the town, past the *Black Jack* and all the other business buildings, until he came to the farther edge of town, and a small four-room cottage built several yards back from the board sidewalk. In front of the cottage was a strip of green grass and a path bordered with red and white spice pinks and blue lobelia, all characterless shades of gray and black in the moonlight.

He walked up to the door and rapped, his gaze on the wide front window and the blank shelves within. Nothing was on any of the three shelves but a loaf of bread; Mag O'Hara's pies and doughnuts didn't last long in Salt Lick.

Mag herself opened the door, and stood there big and broad, peering out at him, her black hair shining in the light from behind her, sudden welcome levening the severity of her broad and heavy face. "George, boy, you're back! Can't ye still come in without knocking, and this your home for nigh onto a year? You look beat out. I've got some fresh doughnuts and your favorite apple pie waitin' for ye; come on in!"

George stepped inside, glancing about the room beyond. "Where's Kit Mag?"

"Out in the kitchen seein' to the beef roast I've had cookin' for ye. We looked for ye back today. They got Holly yet? Or don't ye know?"

George walked over to a chair and sat down, took off his dusty hat and laid it on the floor, letting his arms fall limp on the arms of the chair. "Jim's locked him up in a cell. Dave isn't guilty, Mag."

Mag shut the door, and walked slowly back to stand facing him. "George, boy, ye're the stubbornest man I ever knew since Sean O'Hara died. Why don't ye drop this foolishness and try to forget it? I tell ye to me and Kit what your old man and your brother may have been; it's you we're takin' into the family, not them."

George met her gaze levelly. "And I'm telling you for the thousandth time that I'll never marry Kit with anything like that hanging over me. I'll never marry Kit until I can prove that Dad and Barry had nothing to do with that robbery—and now I've got Dave to clear, too. With only a week to do it in before another innocent man dies."

MAG'S QUICK anger flared, but before she could say anything more the kitchen door swung open, and Kit came swiftly before them, her face eager, her eyes bright with welcome at sight of George sitting there.

He watched her as she came toward him, slim and supple as old Mag once might have been, black-haired and tall like Mag, but the rest of her was Sean O'Hara. The dark brown eyes, the clean-planed mobile face, the stubborn temper and the hard will, all Sean O'Hara over again. Even Mag said so.

Kit stooped over Slade and kissed him on the mouth; her hand closed on his forearm. "George! I'm so glad to have you back."

He looked up at her, thinking how desirable she was, how badly he had wanted her and how long. He freed his arm from her grip, raised the arm, put it around her and drew her down onto the chair arm beside him.

Mag said, "Did ye hear the young fool? He's still after proof, and now it's Dave Holly who's not guilty! The devil take it boy; you think Kit wants to wait forever?"

Kit said quietly, "Ma. Don't, please. You know we can't agree. There's no use. Please."

Mag turned around and stamped out into the kitchen, her heavy face clouded with anger.

As the kitchen door closed behind her mother, Kit said, "You haven't learned anything new that could help George?"

Slade shook his head, where it lay against her shoulder. "No. Everything I've learned only makes it look worse." He told her, then, all that had transpired since he had left Salt Lick in answer to the warden's summons. And at the end, he looked up to see Mag standing in the kitchen doorway and realized that she'd been listening all along. She said nothing, but came into the room to place on the table heaped dishes of food, steaming savory beef and potatoes, fragrant brown doughnuts and the uncut apple pie.

Kit said, "Come on and eat, George. You must be famished."

He followed her to the table, she sat down opposite him and Mag lowered her bulk into a chair at the end of the table, facing them both. George

silently began to fill his plate.

Mag said, trying to exhibit unwanted patience, "Look, boy. Devil take it, why can't you be reasonable? Barry was always a wild young hellion, forever gettin' into one scrape after another. You've got to face that. Ira was a reckless old reprobate, drinkin' like a fish and rather gamble than eat when he was hungry."

Kit interrupted, "Please, Ma. We've been over all that, and over it and over it!"

Mag said belligerently, "Yes, and we're goin' over it again. That boy's got to see reason, if I have to pound it into him myself. Barry and Ira and Dave Holly held up the stage, robbed the stage and the passengers, and killed both passengers. Harkness and Willoughby. Ira and Barry are dead, Dave Holly will soon be. Why can't we accept tragedy with our chins up, and go on and live past it? It's what we've got to do sooner or later—tragedy comes to us all. You think it's been easy for me that Sean O'Hara got killed in a drunken fight at the mine? And me havin' to bring up my girl single-handed, bakin' sinkers and dough-gawds for cow nurses and pick slingers? I've held up my head; I've learned to forget. You can do the same."

George knew what she meant. She didn't mention that the fight in which Sean was killed had been over a skittish light-moraled woman, long gone from Salt Lick Range. And Mag O'Hara hadn't forgotten.

Slade said quietly, "Three men, as yet unknown and running loose on Salt Lick Range, killed four men, Mag: killed Harkness, Willoughby, Barry and Dad, and framed Dave Holly. You heard what I just told Kit. Dave isn't guilty, Mag."

Mag sighed, running one hand deep into her thick black hair and leaving it there, leaning her head on it, her elbow on the table. "It's no use arguin' with ye. Maybe, when this week's up, and ye're convinced that there's no contrary evidence to find, ye'll give up and be sensible. Ye'll have to, or give up Kit, by your own choice."

George reached for another helping of potatoes. "That's why I've got to win out. Mag; all of the reasons are big enough, but the biggest one's for Kit."

WHEN HE rode away from the O'Hara cottage, the night was still young. George Slade kept to the back alleys, grateful for the darkness, his mind worrying at the numerous dark facets of the bewildering situation. He thought of what Dave Holly had said in the ranch kitchen, about being in a tight.

He muttered sardonically, *"He's* in a tight! Hell, he doesn't even know what tight means. I got him to give himself up, when he could have slipped away and laid low: What if more planted evidence shows up to hang him?"

Somewhere deep inside him a mocking voice challenged, *And what if he is g u i l t y? What i f all this smooth build-up is only the slyest trick one man ever put over on another. What was that payroll money box doing in the barn?*

George said vehemently, "No. He's not guilty; I have to believe what I saw in his face."

The deep-down voice continued inexorable argument. *How can you be sure it wasn't a lie you saw in his face? All of this has been done behind so smoothly lying a face that no suspicion has ever been aroused as to the identity of the third man. Would this lie be any smoother than the rest?*

George said, "But I had to stop him from running away. That would have stamped him even more surely as guilty."

I thought you were just telling yourself how he might have slipped away and laid low.

"But I was wrong, I wasn't thinking straight. He couldn't have laid low, not for long, not after what Dad said, and the warden spreading it everywhere. Half the country would have been looking for Dave. They'd have caught him sooner or later, mob-wild, and hanged him. Just as they'll hang him now, if I don't dig up something."

The deep-down voice said, *It'll have to be good. Or someone will come forward with fresh evidence to*

cinch him, maybe several somebodies. Maybe six "vigilantes", by Gawd!"

George stared ahead into the night, feeling the chill crawl on his skin again. The six vigilantes. The six cowboys in the bunkhouse. *Why* hadn't they come to Dave Holly's aid when he was being beaten up and bound? When Lander and George had gone back to the ranch for the money box, the bunkhouse lights had been out. The boys had bedded down early as usual. George had told himself now that he would see them before another day was out.

IT COULDN'T be too important. It was really quite possible the boys hadn't heard a sound, possible that the "vigilantes" had left their horses some distance away and crept up to the house afoot. The more important thing now was to discover some evidence as to the identity of the three unknown men who had committed the robbery.

If there are any three such men, the deep-down voice answered. *The old man told you, dying, "It was Holly. Not only his horse, not only his clothes. It was Holly's voice. I've always known it was Holly who shot me'n Barry. But the law ain't caught up with him. I've got to tell now. And I'm tellin' you, boy, I'm beggin' you on my death bed, don't go on the prod and stick your neck in a noose to even the score for me'n Barry. You let the law take care of Dave Holly. And once the law's got him, maybe Dave'll tell who the other two was."*

George said, "My Gawd, is it possible he can be guilty?"

The deep-down voice echoed, a long way off, as if it were shrinking at its own daring. *And maybe he isn't the only one who can really be guilty. Have you thought of that? Who are you to say that they couldn't rob a stage just because they were your father and your brother? What if, in trying to prove Holly innocent, you only prove all three of them guilty? Have you thought of that!*

George laughed, suddenly, not in mirth. "In a tight! I can't even turn around. So I've got to go ahead. And if there's no opening, I've got to bull it through. The first man I want to talk to is Finn Lee."

4

SLADE turned into the main street of Salt Lick and prodded the sorrel into a little faster pace. He drew rein at last before a small slab cabin beyond the edge of town opposite from Mag O'Hara's. Finn and Dan were still up. Lamplight glowed through the flour sacks over the windows. George dropped the sorrel's reins, stepped up to the door and knocked.

Finn Lee opened the door and stood silhouetted against the lamplight, a long tough-sinewed man with a long thin head and a turkey neck. His brown straggling whiskers, leathery face and squinting eyes were all the same color. He gaped at sight of George, then threw the door wide.

"Well, hammer me down! Look who's here. Dan. Come in, George. Me'n Dan were just havin' ourselves a little game of draw. Damn him, I caught him out on a limb with a bobtail flush and sawn the limb right out from under him. Set in and take a hand."

George stepped into the cabin, seeing Dan Bissel seated at the plank table, chair tilted back on its rear legs, cards held face down against his chest. Dan, burly and bull-stout, had been shot-gun guard ever since Finn had been driving stage. They lived in the same cabin, shared their meals and recreations. No one could remember ever having seen one without the other.

Dan took one look at George's face, dropped his chair legs to all fours, and tossed his hand of cards into the discard. "Sit down, George. We heard the news; Jim got Holly yet? Shut the door, Finn."

Finn closed the door, straddled an up-ended box, and with his foot

shoved toward George the chair he himself had been using, the only other chair in the room.

George said, "Holly's in jail. He gave himself up; he's made a sworn statement that he's not guilty."

Dan winked and leered. "Naw, he ain't guilty! Polecats don't make a stink, either."

George said, "What do you mean by that?"

Finn laughed. "Just what you think he does. We known all the time that Dave Holly was the third man. We seen that mackinaw and the blazeface that night, too. The mackinaw Dave ain't wore since!"

George said, "Why haven't you told on him then? You said at Dad's trial you didn't know who the third man was."

Dan said, "We didn't want him took then. We been watchin' him, knowed he couldn't get away from us. We been layin' low, waitin' for him to lead us to that cached money box."

George said, "I don't believe you. You said at the trial, too, that you knew Dad and Barry were the other two. Maybe you believe that, but it isn't true. I came to ask you to help me get at the bottom of it."

Dan leaned forward, hands braced on the plank table, his bulky shoulders hunched. "We done got to the bottom of it. You might as well face up to it and stop beatin' your brains out over it—your dad and Barry and Dave Holly pulled that job."

George came out of his chair, both fists doubled. "Take that back or I'll knock you stem-winding."

Finn reared to his feet, long head thrust forward on his long neck, clamped a hand on George's shoulder and slammed him back into his chair. "Cut that out, boy. Dan'n me don't lie ary man out of character."

Dan said, "We didn't tell all we knowed at the trial; we didn't have to. The evidence done the trick. Your dad and Barry lyin' there shot up and with their masks still on told the whole story. We knowed them masks, unusual like, they was. Cut out of stiff, shiny black oil cloth."

Finn said, "Me'n Dan kept shet for your sake, kid. No use makin' it any worse'n it was. This is the thanks we get."

Dan hadn't moved. His jaws had set till the muscles stood out, but he stayed where he was.

GEORGE said to Finn Lee. "What else did you know?"

"Look, kid," Dan said quietly. "We'll tell you if you'll keep your shirt on. Pull any rough stuff, and you'll get hurt. Promise to listen peaceable, and we'll spill all we know. Maybe it'll help you to take the whole thing on the chin and forget it."

George said, "All right. I'll meet you half way. I'll keep my ears open and my mouth shut."

Dan leaned toward him earnestly. "Well, when they'd hauled the money box off the stage that night, Holly kept back aways, holdin' the gun on us. The one that reached for the box had holstered his shootin' iron. He was takin' it to Holly. The one that came up to the stage still had his smoke wagon out. He says, "Need any help, Dad?" The one takin' the box to Holly says, "Nope. 'T'ain't heavy, Barry. I can handle it.' Holly says, impatient-like, 'Get a move on, Slade!" The one with the box says, 'Comin', Dave. Catch it.' He handed the box over, and turned back."

Finn put in, "Then I whipped up the horses, and Dan reared up and let 'em have it. The two that had robbed Harkness and Willoughby fired into the stage and turned and run. I pulled out my hog-leg and got 'em both. By this time the one on the horse, the one that had tooken the box—Holly—was blazin' away at me and Dan. He got me first, and I dropped my gun. It was all I could do to hang on."

Dan said, "Then he got me and I flopped. The horses was goin' lickety split by now. He kept firin' after us, but the stage was all he could hit. We just crouched there and waited to get out of range. All we wanted to do about then was get out of there, and we got. I was hit. I knowed Finn was hit. We didn't know yet that Willoughby was dead and Harkness dyin'."

Finn said, "Harkness and Willough-

by was both well knowed and well liked in Sat Lick, Bill Harkness especialy, him bein' a business man. Nobody on this range is goin' to cool down over that robbery until we hang the third man who helped kill 'em."

"Third man, hell," Slade cut in. "*None* of the three has been caught yet. I wish you'd told all that at the trial; it could have saved Dad a year in prison, he might still be alive right now."

Dan scowled and blinked. "Saved him? Are you plumb loco, kid?"

George hitched his chair toward the plank table. "Can't you see it, man? What you've just said is proof that it couldn't have been Dad and Barry and Dave who held up the stage. Do you think it it had really been them they'd have named names like that where you and Dan could hear? It's the last thing they'd have done. But it's exactly what three other men would have done to try to frame Dad and Barry and Dave. And it wasn't too damned smart, either."

Dan said slowly, "Maybe it *was* smart, if you're really on the right track. Your Dad and Barry had never done nothin' like that before. Bein' excited, they might forget and say things just like what we heard 'em say."

Finn said, "It *was* Ira and Barry and Dave Holly, George. I wish there could have been some other way about it. I wish we could of knowed something that would have helped you to start to begin to prove it, some way."

George said, "You've done it."

FINN BLINKED. "Eh? What? Done what?"

"Given me something to start on. The men who staged that robbery knew you and Dan, they knew Dad and Barry and Holly, knews the way you'd all react. They couldn't have planned it so neatly otherwise. And if they knew you that well, *you must know them.* Think, Finn. Think! Wasn't there the least thing familiar about any of them, if you put aside all idea that they were Dad and Barry and Dave?"

Dan said slowly, "Wait! Wait, there was something. I've always been so sure before that it was Ira and Barry and Dave. But when you put it that way—there was something that I thought was kind of odd for your old man to have done, no matter how excited he was."

"When?" George cut in. "When the men first came up to the stage? Or after they'd got the money box?"

Dan said. "It was after he'd taken the money off Bill Harkness and Joe Willoughby. He'd taken it off Willoughby firrst; that wad he gave to Barry—heck. Excuse it. I'll start over. All right, now. Here's three men. They hold up the stage with drawed guns. Robber number one, the hairpin in the mackinaw, he don't leave the saddle: he sits pat with his gun leveled."

Finn said, "Then the other two gets down and comes toward the stage, where me'n Dan is waitin' with our hands up. They orders Joe and Bill to get outen the coach, and Joe and Bill gets out. Robber number two frisks Joe Willoughby and hands the dough to robber number three. He frisks Bill Harkness and sticks that wad in his own jeans."

Dan said, "Then he orders Joe and Bill to get back into the coach, and they get back."

Finn said, "Then robber number one says to get the money box. Number two holsters his gun and reaches for the box, which I'm handin' down to him. Number three is still standin' there with his gun on us, like Dan told you."

"Hold on a minute, Finn," Dan put in. "You're passin' up the thing that *I* thought looked funny." He grinned at George apologetically. "Maybe it don't amount to nothin', but it sure looked queer, with them birds in such a hurry, for him to forget hisself that way and take time to do that."

Finn's long face wrinkled in a scowl. "I ain't sure I know what you mean, Dan."

Dan said, "I guess I never did mention it to you; I just put it out of my head and didn't pay it no mind. But with George bringin' all this up, I got to hinkin' of it again. Puttin' it into words, though—it sounds so kind of puny."

George said, "Never mind that,

Dan; any little thing could be imtant. What did he do?"

"Well, just as he started to reach up for the money box, he stopped deliberate, hauled a plug out of his pocket and bit off a quid. Couldn't he of waited after he'd tooken the box to number one? Or after the stage was gone? But no, he had to have a chew right then. Looked like he was so plumb exicted he didn't think what he was doin' at all."

Finn said, "Sure! I remember that! He just complete and utterly forgot hisself. Then he seen me starin' at him, and he give a kind of start, rammed the plug back in his pocket and grabbed the box quick."

"And afterwards, I got to thinkin'," Dan said. "And I couldn't remember your old man chewin' tobacco none."

Slade said, "He never did. He never chewed tobacco in his whole life. He smoked cigars."

Finn said, "Reckon you better go on a still hunt, George, for all the men in Salt Lick that chaws tobaccer."

George said, "No. I want to find the man who used to chew, and quit suddenly about a year ago."

Dan said, "Jumpin' Judas! You've got me half believin' your way now. Me'n Finn'll help. We can fool around so slick and sly nobody'll catch on to what we're up to. What have we got to lose?"

Slade got to his feet and shoved the chair back toward Finn Lee. "All right, go to it. I need all the help I can get. I'll drop in every night and we'll compare notes."

Dan said pessimistically, "Still, a really slick hombre would keep right on chewin', wouldn't he? Knowin' that to stop off short miht be a dead give away?" Then he saw the look on Slade's face, and added hastily. "But we'll go lookin', George! We'll look good. Maybe that's just the one way he'll slip. The slickest of 'em slips somewhere."

George said as he turned toward the door. "That's a prayer, Danny-boy—that's a prayer!"

AS HE RODE back across town to his room at Mag O'Hara's, George Slade tried to recall all the little angles he might not have given serious consideration up to now. Was there anything stemming either from Bill Harkness or Joe Willoughby that could have any significant bearing?

When he reached the cottage he found Mag gone to bed and Kit waiting up for him. He stretched out on the red plush sofa with his head in Kit's lap and asked her what she thought about it.

Kit's brown eyes gazed into space, as she smoothed his forehead with slow fingers. "About Joe and Bill, George? How could there be?"

"I don't know. I've been remembering that it was Bill Harkness himself who let it out about the payroll money for the ranches and mines being due on that stage; Finn was mad as hell when he found it out, but it was too late then."

Kit's fingers went still on his forehead. "Yes, I remember. And he was even madder after the robbery. He said Harkness had practically invited himself to get killed. He was right; if Bill hadn't talked too much, no one would have known of the money shipment, there wouldn't have been any robbery."

"But how did Bill find out? Finn was always tight-mouthed about valuable cargo. He never told Bill, never told anybody."

Kit's hand slid down the side of his cheek and held it there. "We might as well get it all out in the open, George. Ira told Bill."

"How did Dad know about it?"

"Ira'd been gambling at the *Black Jack*. He owed the house over seven hundred dollars. He told Bill he was a little short of ready cash, but there was a lot of money coming in on the stage, some of it was for his personal use, and he'd pay up then. Bill said he wasn't worrying; Ira's credit was good."

"When did this happen?"

"About a week before the robbery. Then a couple of nights later Bill Harkness spilled it, right there at the bar. Bill was a good egg, everybody liked him, but he had an awful big mouth; he never could keep anything to himself."

Slade said "So he had to brag that

he was going to Red Bend, and would be coming back on the stage loaded with forty thousand iron men. Who told you, Kit?"

"Cass Quenn." Kit began automatically smoothing his forehead again. "He was right there behind the bar, of course, and heard it all. He privately called Bill all kinds of a fool, and Bill didn't mention it again, but the damage was done."

"How's Cass come to tell you?"

"He used to room here, George. The room you have now. After Bill died and Zankery took over for the debt, Zankery offered Cass the room Bill had over the saloon. Zankery preferred to stay on in his cabin. He'd paid for it with gold he'd scratched from the hillside and he was fond of it."

George sat up, slid his arm around her and pulled her close, her head against his shoulder. "I can't see anything much in that. Only more in Dad's favor. If he figured on robbing the stage, why broadcast it? Unless it would be to cover-up, so the list of people knowing about the money wouldn't be too narrow. And Bill couldn't have doublecrossed him."

Kit said, "Well, that isn't impossible. There didn't have to be only three men in on it. There could have been four, or fiv, or six."

WORDS MILLED in George's head: si men—six, cowboys—six vigilantes—six men. He said, "And all of them, those who did it, covering and lying so smoothly that nobody's ever suspected them. Heck, it could be the next man you meet on the street. It could be the boys at the Quarter-Circle-Star; it could be Dan Bissel or Finn Lee; it could be anybody! Who was there in the *Black Jack* that night, when Bill talked too much?"

"Cass said there was hardly anyone there. Just a couple of boys from the White Horse spread; three drifters that dropped in once in a while from Red Bend; Penny Coates, the town barfly, and Sam Wright."

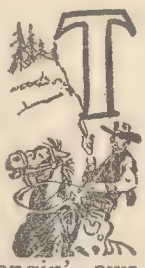
George thought, "Sam Wright again!" Was Sam cropping up too often? He rose suddenly drawing Kit up with him. "I'm going to bed. I'm too tired to think any more. Kiss me goodnight, honey."

He wondered as he went slowly to his own room, was she drawing closer to him, or receding ever farther away, soon to vanish forever beyond his reach? He couldn't think that one out either. There wasn't any answer.

He stayed on the edge of sleep for a long time, wearily trying to put the disjointed stray fragments together: Sam Wright's notable recurrence into the scene; Harkness' talking too much, the look on Dave's face and the oath on the Bible; the man who'd carelessly taken a chew of tobacco; the money box buried under the barn; six cowboys who'd failed to rush to their boss's defense; and six vigilantes.

He muttered last, thickly, half asleep, "Hell, there were six of them, not three. They were all there in the kitchen tonight, shoving Dave around, shutting the last mouth—as they thought—the last danger to themselves. They sold themselves down the river when they did that, if I can only ferret 'em out, in time."

5



THE next day Slade rode out to the Quarter-Circle-Star, and learned nothing that did any good. Mike Dillon said in consternation, "We never heard a thing, George! Hell a-runnin' how could we? With Skeet bangin' away at that darn Jew's harp?"

George said, "And all of you were right here in the bunkhouse all evening?"

"Sure was. Oh, Roy and Beetle was out for a few minutes, heard the horses stampin' in the barn. But nothin' was wrong; they didn't see nobody around."

Slade rode back to Salt Lick. The six vigilantes must have been very quiet, he thought. Still, a twanging Jew's-harp could drown a lot of other sounds—a Jew's-harp and Mike Dillon's bull roar of laughter.

For two days after that he went on his still hunt. The first day he learned nothing. Dan Bissel and Finn Lee had the same results to report. It was a different story the next night when they pooled their gleanings. George had listed several men who chewed and hadn't abandoned the habit, among them Cass Queen and Mike Dillon.

Finn said, "Well, we ain't slightin' nobody. We're takin' 'em all in. Rink Zankery never uses tobacco in any form. Mingo Toomey chews snuff. Dave Holly used to chew, but he quit a long time ago because it didn't taste good no more. He tooken to cigarettes."

Dan looked at George meaningly. "I dug me up a man who quit chewin' about a year ago because his missus was always complain' about the nasty habit."

Slade said, "Who?"

Dan grinned. "Sam Wright. And Sam's been sayin' here and there, not right lately though, that Zankery had all the luck; said he wished he'd of had the chance to loan Rink twenty six thousand bucks."

George stared at him. "I've been thinking about that, Dan. Sam's been saying a lot of things, hasn't he?"

"Oh, you'd heard that."

"Yes. Just today. From Cass Queen."

Dan said, "Mingo Toomey told me."

George thought, I'm going to see Jim Lander. He didn't say it. He went on back to Mag O'Hara's.

For four days then George Slade drove himself distracted running down wild leads that led nowhere. He spent so much time covertly studying the crepe-festooned document on the *Black Jack* wall that he learned every word of it by heart, until he could see it as clearly in his mind's eye as if it were before him.

He talked endlessly with Cass Queen and Mingo Toomey, learned no more than he already knew.

A less stubborn man might have given up in despair. Six days of his week of grace were gone. He hadn't seen Dave Holly or Jim Lander since the day of his return to Salt Lick. That evening of the sixth day he told Kit O'Hara;

"There's nothing more to learn. I have to think it out, or day after tomorrow Dave dies."

Kit said, "Jim was right, George. The men are getting restless, impatient with Jim for not bringing Dave to trial and getting it over."

George said, "I know. I heard them on the street today. They can't understand what he's waiting for, when he's got all the evidence he needs against Dave. He said they'd figure that way. I've got to see Jim tomorrow night It's my last day of grace."

He shut himself into his room to think. To think largely, in desperation, of Dave Holly swinging at the end of a rope.

GEORGE STAYED locked in his room for twenty-two hours, refusing food or sleep. The next night he emerged haggard and drawn-faced and went directly to Jim Lander's office.

Lander received him without question or comment, and waved him to a chair.

George refused the chair. "I'll keep my feet I have to stay awake. I'm on the trail of something. I ought to be; I've about thought myself crazy... Jim, there's something wrong with that paper Bill Harkness made out to Rink Zankery, but I can't figure what it is yet."

Lander's red face showed nothing but a mild pity. "Where'd you get that wild idea? What could be wrong with it? And what's that got to do with Dave Holly? I-gonnies, boy are you losin' your mind?"

George said, "A few times I've felt like it. But look here, Jim. I've come to some solid conclusions. There were six men in on that robbery, three who took care of the minor chores such as hiding the money box and what not, and three who did the actual job They were the six 'vigilantes' who tied Dave up and left him for me to finish."

Lander said, "Sit down and let me buy you a drink, boy; you're thinkin' yourself into a fever."

George ignored the interruption. "The three who did the actual rob-

bing and killing are the only ones we need to consider right now. Once we get them, we can haul in the other three. Think this over. No robber gang has been hanging around Salt Lick Range; this is the first robbery and killing we've ever had. There hasn't been any trouble since. Yet that money was cached in our barn. Dave stumbles onto it. The money disappears."

"Maybe it was already gone, George; Dave didn't look to see."

"I'll bet you anything it wasn't. Remember that dry heap of dirt that caugh Dave's attention If the money was gone, why was anybody poking around here? To make sure it hadn't been disturbed, of course."

Lander siad, "I-gonnies, boy! For the first time you're makin' sense. Go on."

"That was a damned clever robbery, Planned for a long time, planned to the last detail. Planned by men we knew, men who had lived among us so long as good and square men that they were above suspicion. Object? One big haul, all of the three ringleaders set for life, and never step off the narrow road to make any of them suspect."

Lander's sleepy eyes were watching him intently. "Keep goin'; you're still makin' sense."

"The three chore men might have thought the main object of that holdup was the money box. It wasn't. It was Bill Harkness' life."

"Eh? You goin' crazy again? There's no sense to that!"

"Oh, yes there is! Who did Bill's death set up for life in Clover with a capital C? Cass Queen, Mingo Toomey, and Rink Zankery. They own the *Black Jack* jointly. Rink took Cass and Mingo into partnership the week after Bill died. Did you know that?"

Lander's hushed voice dropped nearly to a whisper. "I didn't; I don't think anybody else does. How did you find it out?"

"From our town lawyer, on my promise of sworn secrecy. Mingo Toomey made out the document, but the lawyer said it was all clear and legal. And Mingo Toomey made out that paper on the *Black Jack* wall, if we knew the truth. I'd bet anything on it. Get Dave Holly in here, will you, Jim?"

LANDER SLID off his favorite perch, his desk, and went out. He came back shortly with Holly in tow. George began firing questions at Holly the minute he was inside the door "Dave, where were you living when the robbery was pulled?"

"Why, in the old Ferris cabin, over beyond Mag O'Hara's."

George said, "Toomey lives there now. How'd you come to get so drunk that night, Dave? You've never been much of a drinking man, have you?"

Holly grinned sheepishly "No. That's why I plowed under so easy that night. But I had company, and I was damned if I was goin' to let him out-drink me. He did, though; he had to nigh carry me home"

"Somebody you met in the *Black Jack?*"

"No, he come by the cabin and invited me. I told him afterwards never to ask me again, though; I couldn't take it."

George said sharply, "Who was it."

"Why, a nice pleasant fella from over Star Hill. Sam Wright."

George's gaze flicked to Lander. "So. We have four of 'em tagged. Mingo, Cass and Rink, the leaders. Sam Wright one of the chore men. Four down, and two to go."

Holly said, "Why, that's plumb foolish!"

George said, "Is it? Listen. Cass and Mingo came here and got themselves solid with Bill Harkness. Bill said Cass was the best barman he'd ever had. Mingo Toomey stands ace high because he's really a square gambler who won't tolerate any crooked work. Who would ever suspect them? They get all set here, in solid with the whole range, then what happens?

"Rink Zankery drifts in, that's what! And begins digging around. Pretty soon he's bringing dust and nuggets into town. He likes everybody and everybody likes him, but nobody can find out where his mine is. Then Harkness gets into some kind of pinch; he borrows twenty

six thousand from the nice old prospector That's a lot of coin to dig out of the hills, where no gold was ever found before."

Lander said gently, "Gold is where you find it, boy."

"Maybe! Maybe Rink put it there to find, too. How did Bill ever get into a pinch like that? The *Black Jack's* a money maker. Bill was always lousy with cash."

Lander said, "But that paper's all fair and square, boy. That's Bill's real signature on it."

"Yes. But was it like that when Bill signed it? Did Bill know what he was signing? There's something wrong with that document, Jim, and I'm going to find out what it is. I don't care how much hell I raise. The week's up. What have I got to lose? I'm going after Mingo Toomey."

"Yeah? When?"

"The minute the saloon's closed and he's in his cabin. And you remember! You said you'd back me."

Lander's sleepy eyes blinked. "Yeah I'll back you, sure. If you find out anything worth salt. Better come on back to your cell, Dave, and say your prayers; there ain't no tellin' what this night'll bring."

6

THEN THE lamp winked on in Toomey's cabin, George Slade came striding out of the brush across the road where he had been waiting. He shoved open the door without knocking, locked it behind him and thrust the key into his pocket.

Toomey, who had just removed his hat and tossed it aside, turned to look with inquiring eyes and raised brows. He was a big man, by several pounds and two inches bigger than George Slade. He said mildly;

"Well! Company is always welcome. But don't you think you're being a trifle over-enthusiastic?"

George moved toward him, hands swinging loose at his sides. He was not wearing his gun. Toomey never carried a gun George said, "You and I are going to talk, Mingo."

"Yes? What about?"

"About the stage robbery you and Cass and Rink pulled, with the help of Sam Wright and a couple others."

Toomey smiled. "Cass was on duty here in the saloon that night, if I remember correctly Rink was off prospecting in the hills"

George said, "Excuses won't go down any more, Mingo. You've been slick, but you've played out your string. You had plenty of time to call Rink in for the robbery; he had plenty of time to slide back to the hills again—before he drifted into town and put on the big act of being so astounded to find the saloon his property."

Toomey laughed aloud. "George, if this is meant to be amusing, you've succeeded I find it highly entertaining, but a trifle silly."

George plowed on blindly, riding his bluff for all it was worth. "I've been enquiring around, Mingo, and I've learned things. I know you sent one of the Quarter-Circle-Star boys to call Rink in, the day before the robbery; I know Rink Zankery first came to Salt Lick to join you and Cass Queen. I know he never found any gold in these hills; he planted it there. I know you manoeuvered Bill Harkness into a corner, and persuaded him to borrow money from Zankery."

Toomey was standing erect now, watching George quietly There was no hint of alarm on his face. He said, "You seem to know a great deal, for a man who knows nothing."

George said, "I know you made out that document that hangs on the *Black Jack* wall and I know it's crooked. Bill Harkness never knew what he was signing. I know you and Rink Zankery and Sam Wright held up the stage—after Sam got Dave Holly drunk so you could swipe his horse and clothes. You were the man in the mackinaw. Sam Wright was the man who took the money box, and forgot himself and bit off a quid before he took it."

Toomey was watching him carefully now, but still with no sign of alarm. He looked only like a man who

is somewhat amazed and wholly puzzled.

George plowed doggedly on. "I know some of the Quarter-Circle-Star boys were doing your chore work. You paid them off, and had them cache the money box under the barn. They never knew the score, never knew your main object in that holdup was to kill off Bill Harkness so you three would be set for life. I doubt that even Sam Wright knew that."

Toomey said, "You see what a logical and believable story a man can build up out of circumstantial evidence, George. It has hanged many an innocent man."

GEORGE SLADE said, "I know that you made out a document taking you and Cass Queen in with Rink Zankery as joint owners of the Black Jack. I admitted before, you've been slick, all of you. You've all made slips here and there, and I've picked 'em up; but you made the biggest mistake of your life when you framed Dad and Barry and Dave Holly to keep your own skirts clear. That's going to hang the lot of you, Mingo."

Toomey said, like a man whose long-suffering patience is being severely tried, "Nothing's going to hang anybody, but Dave Holly. If you have any brains, you might use them. If—"

He stopped and stood listening. There had been a sound of scuffling feet outside. It did not come again.

George ignored it. "What were you going to say?"

Toomey looked at him. "I was going to say, if you have any brains you might use them. If everything you have just said in your unwarranted accusation were true, what does it profit you? I could knock holes in it from beginning to end. It takes proof to hang a man, George, the kind of proof that stands against Dave Holly. And nowhere and in no way could you ever find a shred of proof to back up your silly tissue of lies."

Slade said, "No. There's no proof. You're going to admit it, if I have to beat the head off your shoulders, you're going to admit it"

Toomey said, like a man whose patience is played out, "See here, George, I'm getting a little tired of this. Kindly go on home so I can get to bed."

The sound of scuffling feet came again from outside. There was a slight rasping noise mingled with it, as if someone had brushed against the outer wall near the window There was only one window, only one door.

Toomey smiled faintly. "My bodyguard, on the job You didn't know I kept a bodyguard, did you? I often carry large sums of money, you know. Cass Queen and Sam Wright. They keep a watch over me, especially when I come home at night That is the only personal connection they have with me, George. And now, will you kindly get along with you, before I call Sam and Cass in and have you thrown out?"

George said, "You heard me."

"Yes, and you heard me I can knock you down and drag you out if I have to."

George said, "I have the key."

Toomey laughed. He moved with incredible flash, bringing up a doubled fist no harder than an iron ingot.

GEORGE SLADE stumbled back against the wall, half stunned from the unexpected punch. The room whirled and his eyes drooped shut. He found himself wondering how a man who spent his time behind a card table could pack so much power.

Then he pulled himself together. He heard the shuffle of feet outside again, near the window, in the street. It would take more than two men to make that much sound. He forced his eyes open and flicked a glance at the window. The cracked green blind was down, but it hung awry. A man couldn't see out into the night, but anyone outside the window could peer in.

George dragged himself out of that split second of daze, and launched himself. He feinted left and right to avoid Toomey's follow-up, and slipped deftly into the center of the floor.

He was ready for the gambler this time, and as Toomey came within

range, Slade flicked out with his left, planting a sharp right to the pit of Toomey's stomach. The gambler grunted and countered with a bludgeon right to the side of George's head. The blow hurt; it set Slade's ears to ringing.

Again, in a glimmer of time for thought, George marvelled at Toomey's physical condition. The gambler's flesh had the solid resillience of a bag of sand; he seemed just about as impervious to punishment.

The two sparred for a moment, then George saw an opening, and lashed out with a left hook. Toomey ducked to take the punch high on the head, and George felt the bones of his hand shatter, felt his elbow go numb. He winced insensibly, and Toomey came in like lightning to take advantage of the injury.

George forced a clinch, to save himself, and Toomey changed tactics swiftly. He applied a crushing arm hold with the patent intent of punishing George's injured left hand, forced the hand between his knees and began to grind it between his powerful bones.

George caught a sobbing breath, half blinded by the excruciating pain, and for the first time since the start of the fight Toomey spoke. "You asked for it, Slade! And, by Gawd, you're going to get it."

George struck out blindly and ineffectually with his right, then called on reason in spite of the pain in his hand. He suddenly threw his weight forward to retain his balance, lifted his left foot, and brought his boot-heel down hard on the gambler's toes.

Toomey gasped in pain, and relaxed his hold involuntarily. George broke free. "That evens us up, Mingo, eh? My hand and your foot"

Toomey made no answer, beyond a malevolent glare. The noise was louder outside now, and somewhere somebody muttered something, someone near the window answered. George was no more than half conscious of the sounds, and Toomey was too enraged to hear them at all. He started slowly toward George, moving with a limp.

Slade's left arm was rapidly turning numb to the shoulder, and he kept it crooked high in front of his face. The two circled, and George darted in to close quarters, feinting with the useless left, lashing out with his right, The blow landed on Toomey's cheek bone, and again George forced him into a clinch.

"Break clean!" Toomey snarled.

"Clean?" George echoed. "What do you know about fighting clean?"

THE VOICE sounded near the window outside again, this time clearly enough to be understood. "Keep away from there! I-gonnies, I'll have no mob violence. He ain't hurtin' Toomey—yet." Somebody tried the door.

Insensibly George relaxed his vigilance. Toomey hadn't heard Lander's voice; he hadn't heard anything. He was in a maniacal fury, and he drove upward with a vicious knee to the groin. George staggered back, numbed by agony, only half feeling the rain of rights and lefts that battered into his face.

He blacked out for an instant, and came to his senses only as he fell over backwards.

Lander's voice sounded outside again, a fist banged on the wall by the window, the door rattled. Lander barked, "I told you to keep away from there, damn you! We ain't had no mobs in Salt Lick; we ain't goin' to have none!"

Toomey had to hear that. He whirled and looked at the window, and a slow smile crossed his face. "Well, well! So I've got some protection. Cass and Sam have called in the sheriff. As if I needed them."

He turned, and move slowly toward George, still smiling, still limping, but supremely confident, ready to deliver a leisurely *coup de grace.*

George's body ached intolerably, but for that minute in which Toomey's attention had been distracted, he had lain there doubled against the wall, aware of his strength returning, thanking his lucky star that the gambler's knee hadn't struck squarely. With a tremendous effort of will, he drove the cobwebs from his brain, and dragged his eyelids wider apart.

He rolled over on his back, with a groan of pain he had no need to simulate.

Toomey slid back. He said mockingly, "Oh, no you don't! I think we'll just clean this up right now. And Jim can slap you in jail for assault and battery."

The gambler snatched up the nearest heavy home-made chair. He swung it high, shattering it against the cabin wall, caught up one of the clumsy stout legs for a club, and advanced for the kill.

George lay watching him with slitted eyes. At the instant Toomey bent low to bring the bludgeon down on the boy's skull, George lashed up with his bootheels, with all the remaining strength he could summon.

Both feet landed. George felt more than he heard the result of the double blow. He felt Toomey's nose crumple, felt the grit of bone as the gambler's big white teeth splintered and the jaw gave.

Toomey cried out hoarsely as he went down.

George relaxed to the edge of insensibility. But half heard, half sensed, he caught the sounds from outside again. A fist, then something heavier than any fist, crashed against the door. Lander shouted an angry command.

An angrier voice replied defiantly. Several voices. "The hell with you! We're going in there!".... "We'll kill the son!".... "We'll tear him into doll ribbons!"

Lander shouted again through the window "Open up in there! Break it up, Mingo! Give up peaceably, and you've got a chance. I can't hold these boys much longer."

GEORGE PRIED his lids apart and tried to get to his feet. His stomach muscles were drawn into a tight cramp. He turned onto his side, and managed to lift himself to an elbow. The room was an unholy mess. The shattered chair was strewn about. In falling, Toomey had overturned the table into a mass of shattered dishes. Some of the shards had cut into his cheek. A pot of cold beans had overturned and spilled its contents into the one unbroken bowl.

Toomey lay on his face on the floor ten feet away. Blood gushed from his mashed nose and lacerated mouth, but his eyes were open and glaring with venom as he painfully lifted his head and turned his gaze on George.

George said softly, "You heard that, Mingo. They're after you, not me. Half the men in town know the whole dirty set-up by now. Do you talk, or do I hold Jim back and let the mob take you?"

Toomey spat blood and gasped, "Go to hell."

George felt along the wall behind him. He hooked the fingers of his right hand over a stud brace, and pulled himself to his feet. For an instant he tottered precariously, still unable to draw himself completely erect. He took a series of duck-like steps toward the gambler, slipped in a pool of blood, and fell across Toomey's shoulders.

The gambler roused himself in an effort to throw off the boy's weight.

The battering on the door was devilishly steady now, the shouting outside was almost continuous. The door panels began to splinter.

George drove downward with all his strength with the elbow of his injured left arm. The blow landed just below Toomey's ear. The gambler collapsed and lay flat on the floor, cursing in pain, as Geroge drove his right hand into the bleeding pulp of a face.

George was shouting now, to make himself heard above the din from outside. "They can have you, Mingo. So help me God I'll give you to 'em, if you don't talk. Talk, damn you! What was there in that paper—"

The word blanked out on his tongue. He crouched there with his mouth half open, hearing the door shattering. A moment of almost painful clarity cut through his brain, like the opening of a camera shutter. He saw the document hanging on the *Black Jack* wall, the exact position of the words, the meaning of that position which had eluded him so long.

There was a flash of clarity in the gambler's brain, too. There was a

chance for a man in a jail cell. Cells had been broken open before. But there could be no chance for any man whose flesh had been riddled by a senseless mob, and he craved the safety of the cell now, the protection of the law—until the men he would not name could band together and set him free.

Mingo rolled over and tried to sit up; he couldn't make it. He rolled again, and got to hands and knees, head hanging. He forced the head to lift, and as he crouched there, blood dripping from his chin, the door crashed in.

A crowd of men poured into the room behind it, armed with clubbed guns and knotted sticks. Lander was in the lead, both arms spread, forcing them back.

"Damn it, Jim!" One of them swung his hickory ax handle in threat. "Get out of the way! We'll rush you!"

Toomey stared at them and spoke thickly through puffing lips. "Keep 'em back. It's your job, Lander; you're the law. Keep 'em back. I'll talk."

George shouted wildly, "I've got it! I've got it!" He leaned toward the gambler. "Mingo! Talk fast. Who, or what, was Bill Harkness' *beloved Sal?*"

Toomey closed his eyes. The stillness of the room was loud in his ears. The stillness of men waiting. He said slowly, "It was his hog-leg. His Colt revolver with the seven-inch barrel. Short for salivater"

Then Mingo Toomey talked.

And what seemed a long time afterward, Lander said softly, "That was a right good show you put on, boys. Almost scared me a time or two. You can drop the clubs now. We got to haul Mingo to his cell. I-gonnies, we got a few others to pick up, too."

IT WAS after daybreak when George came again to Mag O'Hara's cabin. Both Mag and Kit were up waiting for him, now. He had stopped at Lander's to bathe and make himself presentable. He was sore and conscious of a few assorted aches, but not much evidence of the fight showed on the surface.

Mag opened the door, and he walked in grinning. He went straight to Kit, and took her in both arms, ignoring the bandaged left hand.

Mag said, "Ring out the wedding bells, eh?"

George turned to look at her, his right arm still around Kit. "Any old time. It's all over. It was a honey while it lasted."

Mag said, "Sean would have loved it. We heard a good deal from the boys already."

Kit said, "We heard how Mingo jockeyed Bill Harkness into a tight place, holding out on the funds at the *Black Jack*, then got Bill to borrow of Rink. But it isn't clear what he did to that paper, George."

George took his arm from about the girl, and shoved his right hand in his pocket. "I've got it, here. See for yourself." He unfolded the document and handed it to Kit.

Mag crowded at her daughter's shoulder, following the words carefully from beginning to end.

To whom it may concern:

This is to certify that Rink Zankery has on this day loaned me the sum of $26,000 bucks. As security for so generous a loan I hereby make him silent partner in my beloved Saloon, which is to become his sole property in case it ever proves impossible for me to pay back this loan.

Signed...Bill Harkness
Witness... Cass Queen.

George said, "It was originally only a prankish joke—that was what Bill Harkness thought. He wasn't very far in the red. He borrowed six hundred dollars from Zankery, offered to give Rink his note. Rink laughed at it. Cass grinned, and told Bill that Rink ought to have some security. He said, *'Give him half interest in your beloved Sal, Bill. Mingo can draw up the paper. That ought to do it'. Harkness* thought it was pretty funny, and told Mingo to get busy with the writing."

Kit said, "His beloved Sal? What in the world—"

Slade looked down at the paper

held in the girl's fingers. "Bill's revolver. Mingo and Cass worked on that for months, to spring it just right. Started in by calling the gun Bill's salivater, then added the beloved, then shortened it to Sal. But only for Bill's benefit; never where anyone else might overhear, and never too often, lest Bill start using the term himself. After Bill was killed, they conveniently forgot all about it."

Mag said, "But one of the boys said Bill had paid back that loan the next week! One of the boys that heard Mingo spill everything to Jim. He was too excited to make sense."

GEORGE SAID, "No. He was right. Mingo and Rink were both crooks. Mag; that gold Rink salted to find in the hills was left from a former robbery; taken from a prospector they killed. Mingo was an expert forger. He made an exact copy of that paper. When Bill paid Rink back his six hundred, Mingo handed the forged copy over to Bill. In front of Mingo and Cass, and Rink, Bill tore up the copy and threw it into a spittoon. Then they all forgot about it. Mingo kept the original paper, added a dollar mark, a figure two, a comma and a zero to the six hundred, added two O's and an N to the Sal, and tucked it away for future use"

Mag muttered, "The devil was too clever to live."

George laid his arm around Kit's shoulders. "He isn't alive anymore, Mag, that's why I didn't get here before. Jim held the trial right there at the jail. Dave and I saw them hanged, all seven of them. Some of it wasn't easy to take—the boys from the Quarter-Circle-Star—"

Kit said, "Seven!"

George's arm tightened across her shoulders. "Yes. Mingo, Rink Zankery, Cass Queen, Sam Wright, and the three from the ranch, Roy and Skeet and Beetle."

Kit stared down at the document in her fingers, and began to tear it slowly across and across. "Then you were right about the six vigilantes. And the box buried in the barn"

Mag said, "Who was them six that beat Dave up?"

"Sam, Mingo, Cass and Rink circled out and beat me to the ranch, Mag. Beetle had already warned Mingo that Dave had found the box, had taken the money out and delivered it to Mingo to split."

"So they figured they had to get rid of Dave."

"That's right. They sneaked up afoot. Mingo whistled a signal. Beetle said he heard the horses stamping, and he and Roy went out. Skeet covered them with his Jew's harp. Mingo didn't leave out a thing when he talked, Mag. He figured on breaking jail. But Jim slapped him in a cell and hauled the others in, with half the town to help the good work along. I guess we can start that forgetting, Mag."

Mag said, "Praise be. Where are you two young ones goin' to live after the weddin'? You can have the cottage if you want it. Oh!.....And what's goin' to become of the *Black Jack* now!"

George sighed in content. "Dave's going to take it over. Rink got it by fraud, and Bill Harkness had no heirs." He looked down at Kit. "We're going to live on the Quarter-Circle-Star."

Kit glanced up quickly from the shreds of paper she still held. "You're buying it back, George!"

"No. I couldn't, could I? I'm broke. Dave's making me a present of it. He says, after all, he got it so cheap, and he's lived there a year, what he paid wasn't even rent."

Mag said, "And there's no payin' the debt to a man who's saved your life."

George said, "That wasn't mentioned."

Mag yawned and turned to leave the room. "I've got to get me a nap. The boys'll be late gettin' their pies and doughnuts this time. But I can't help it. I've had enough excitement for one day."

George and Kit stood in silence and watched the heavy figure going away from them, watched the door close behind her.

Kit whirled, and raised both arms, to clasp them about George's neck.

Digger John's Big Blow

by A. A. BAKER

(author of "Digger John's Rescue")

The rubble blocked the train.

The agreement was signed and everyone knew that Digger John was a man of his word. If he hadn't dug ten ounces or more out of the Inheritance Mine within 30 days, he'd leave Gold Run. But how could anyone dig with a broken arm, and broken fingers?

DIGGER JOHN sat with his back to a scrub pine tree and watched the gang of China-boys muck the rock and dirt out of the cut below him. The powder smoke from the dynamite blast, still lingered in the clean Sierra air as the settling red dust covered their brown bodies. Digger sighed when he heard the chuffing of the wood-burning engine in the distance. He filled a can with blasting powder, tamped in a cap and dangled it over the edge of the cut with a long piece of string, waited with a twinkle in his eye.

The smoking engine snorted around the bend and screetched to a hurried halt. The engineer peered up, spotted the miner, and climbed out of the cab. "Hey, Coffee! Jake Coffee!" a tinge of bitter resignation was in his shout, "Thet blasted Digger John is up to another of his tricks. Come on up here, Coffee!"

A broad-shouldered man jumped from the third box-car back and stamped up the roadbed. Digger watched him come and cocked his navy Colt. Coffee roared with a fury that made the nugget watch chain on his flowered vest dance, and his short legs quivered as he skipped on the ties.

"Get off this property!" Coffee's

words thundered in the cut and threshed through the mountain pines like a boulder crashes down a hillside. "*You* can't stop this railroad! We're building under permit from the U. S. Congress and one dang red-whiskered gold miner ain't goin' to stop us. Now pull that can of whatever you got hangin' there up, so's my blue-bellied engineer will take this work train up to where it's needed!"

Digger John grinned down at the furious train boss and spat an oily stream of tobacco juice at his can of powder. "I ain't botherin' yore railroad buildin'. I'm prospectin' fer gold." He pointed to a slab of bedrock, sticking out of the wall, with his thumb. "I figger they's a pocket back of thet rock and I'm gonna let off a little blast to break her loose Thet little blast might uncover coupl'a hunert ounces. The U-nited States Congress didn't give yew the mineral rights on the whole Sierra mountains; naow, did it?"

Coffee's face reddened and his words shot out like the ping of released steam. "There's no gold there and you know it! You're just tryin' to fill up the cut and delay our work. Just 'cause you hate the railroad..."

"No gold? There's gold everywhere in California. Thet's the reason yew kin build this railroad; the fellers puttin' up the money made it in the goldfields. They wouldn't agree with yew that they's no gold under thet chunk of bedrock. But, they's no use of us argying about it, I'll prove it!" Digger aimed his Colt and fired into the can of blasting powder. The flat explosion blew gravel and dust into the cut and the track was completely covered by the rumbling slide. Digger slid down the bank and dug stubby fingers into the cavity.

Coffee and the engineer climbed out from under the engine tender and Coffee rushed back to the box car office, emerged with a rifle. Digger had climbed back to the top of the bank and, before Coffee could fire, shouted, "Sure an' yew were right! She's as bare of gold as..." His voice faded at the *boom* of Coffee's gun and he disappeared into the trees. Coffee angrily stumped to the head of the engine and surveyed the blocked cut.

DIGGER JOHN moved fast down the winding trail. The sun was setting and he had to hurry to Dredger's bar before some hydraulic miner beat him to his favorite place by the open whiskey barrel. He arrived at the head end of Gold Run's main street just as the miners were entering from lower town. Digger sprinted the last hundred yards and had his time cup filled as the miners arrived.

The hydraulic foreman shouted, "Well Digger, fust in agin. Yew shore look happy; bin up bothering Coffee and his railroad agin?"

Digger John looked over the grinning faces and slowly answered. "Nope, bin prospectin'. Foll'ied a lead from thet grassy flat back of Flathead Rock, right up to whar thet chiny gang is diggin'. Jest ready to clean up when Coffee ordered me off. Didn't argy a bit, jest left; if'n anybody's goin' by the railroad camp, they kin tell the cook to hold up dinner. They'll be late diggin' out thar engine. They got it in the way of my blastin'."

Dredger Dan emerged from the back room and measured the barrel with a practiced eye. "Better hit a pocket soon, Digger. Yew spend more time dippin' then yew do diggin'; yore credit's runnin' out. Stop devilin' them railroad men an' git to minin'."

"Don't be aworryin', I got a spot picked out an' she'll really pay off."

The ears of the men perked up and the room silenced. The whiskered miner had uncovered some rich pockets and knew the goldfields like no other man.

"The claim I got an eye on is right in the middle of Canyon Creek Diggin's. She's full of pitchur gold. Fellow took ten thousand dollars out, 'bout forty feet away. 'Member the strike Art Terry made above Dutch Flat? Same kind of dirt an' if'n I kin talk the man what owns the mineral rights, into letting me work her. Fifty-fifty, I'll really..."

The fat hotel owner sneered. "Only

Placer on Canyon Creek worth a hoot, is one owned by Coffee, thet railroad construction boss. His old man held thet claim an' refused to work it. Figgered his boy Jake would. Old man used to call it inheritance mine; drank up ever'thing he ever mined an' was afeered to take the dust out fer fear he'd drink it up, too. Wanted to leave somethin' fer his boy. Only thing he left was thet claim and the nugget chain young Coffee's wearin' now.

"Then, when the boy come out to California, he turns out to be a danged railroad man! Won't touch the claim won't let anyone else touch it! Claims his old man died because of gold minin' an' hates miners worse'n Digger hates the railroad!"

"Sure, I knew old man Coffee," spoke up the hydraulic boss, "seen him in 'Frisco onc't. Bought out the entire Bella Union dance hall an' spent the whole night dancin' with the girls. Drinkin' champagne out'a slippers an' ended the night up by roastin' a whole pig on top of the roulette table. Must'a cost him thousands fer thet one night!"

Digger John dipped his cup and made ready to speak. He coughed a little on the raw redeye and gazed over the throng clustered in the bar. "Had my eye on thet claim fer a long..."

THE CROWD hushed as the batwing doors slammed open and an angry voice interrupted. "And that's as close as you'll ever get to it!" The words emitted sibilantly from Jake Coffee. "The gold will rot in the ground before you'll ever sink shaft in my property!" His black eyes burned and his shoulders hunched in the heavy mackinaw. One hand held a lighted lantern while the other nervously fingered his watch again.

"What yew got against gold minin', lad?" enquired Digger, softly.

"Made a drunkard out of my old man! What'd gold ever do for you? Spend half the time moochin' off your friends and the other half in some sunbaked canyon, breakin' your back for a few dollars in gold. If you find anything, some rat will either steal it or, you'll drink it up in a month!"

The big miner scratched his whiskers judiciously and answered, "Tain't always true, what yew state. Yew're buildin' a railroad on gold thet some rats stole from the man thet found it. *Thet's* progress, I suppose? Me, I spend my findin's on my friends an' sometimes I have to..."

"I don't know why you hate the railroad!" Coffee was shouting now. "Back East I worked for the roads and we'll build this one over these mountains in spite of you!"

Digger was grinning. "Naow, I didn't say I hated the railroad; might be some value someday. But, looks like the people is payin' a big price fer the railroad to make a dollar. Congress give them every other section of land, an' thet's a lot of land. Lots of gold in the dirt an' rocks of the Sierras. Railoads ain't goin' to let a prospector dig thet gold out, jest like yew ain't goin' to let no man dig the gold out'a yore claim. Naow, if'n..."

Coffee's face whitened and he sneered, "You stop your tricks to halt our progress and I'll give you a chance to work that claim!" He swung the lantern in angry darts.

"They's gold there," answered Digger and moved closer to Coffee; "I could take out ten ounces in ten minutes onc't I got by the surface."

Coffee snarled, "I'll give you a thirty day lease and, if you can take out ten ounces in the thirty days, I'll give you the claim! But, if you can't take out ten ounces in the thirty days, then you get out of these mountains entirely! You agree to get out and stay out until we complete the roadbed over this Summit!"

The big miner rubbed his face and moved in close to Coffee. The tension in the bar was mounting. This was no ordinary business deal and the undercurrent could be felt way out in the street. Digger spoke. "Dredger Dan, draw up the papers!"

Dredger scribbled hurriedly, then read the lease. "*'I, Jake Cofee, agree thet if'n Digger John takes ten ounces of gold or more off'n my claim, known here'bouts as Inheri-*

tance Claim, in thirty days, I will deed the full title of said claim to Digger John.' Thet suit all parties consarned?"

"No," growled the railroad man, "make it dated beginning tonight until thirty days from now and, add in that agreement, that Digger John is to leave the mountains until the railroad is over the summit if he loses."

The hotel owner hurriedly added to the paper and the miner and railroad man signed.

DIGGER PUSHED out a big stubby hand to shake but Coffee turned away. The miner shrugged and reached for his cup when Coffee whirled in unexpected fury and smashed Digger full in the face with his burning lantern; glass broke, burning oil seeped onto the miner's red shirt and ignited. Digger staggered, and his attacker rushed the advantage. He clubbed the blinded miner to the floor while the crowd drew back to give them fighting room. Digger was almost helpless and Dredger attempted to vault the bar, to his aid, but slipped and landed rump first in the open whiskey barrel.

DIGGER ROLLED away from the kicks Coffee was throwing at his head and caught one arm under the oak foot rail. With the speed of a two-hundred-pound mountain lion, the railroad man stamped a heavy boot acrossed the exposed forearm and the snap of the bone could be heard. Digger roared, and pulled himself free. His arm dangled loosely but his eyes were clearing. Coffee faltered and backed away. The crowd sensed the fight was turning and Digger closed in, his one good arm reaching for Coffee's throat as Death flapped oily wings overhead.

Coffee swung frantically with his smashed lantern and hte wire cage fastened over Digger John's outstretched hand. The fingers snapped as Coffee turned viciously and Digger's hand went limp. A city man in the swaying crowd started screaming. "It's murder! They'll kill each..." The hydraulic boss slapped him roughly and then dodged a hay maker because he wanted to see the finish of a real fight. He slugged the city man, then stood on his limp body, and saw that Digger had Coffee on the floor and each thud of his boots found a mark until the railroad man was unconscious. Tender hands restrained the fighting miner and laid him out on the roulette table.

Digger grimaced when he tried to move his broken fingers and broken forearm, "The dirty cuss fixed me up so's I cain't even hold a tin cup! How'm I gonna do my drinkin'?"

Dredger Dan wrung whiskey from his pants and snapped. "Yew ain't gonna do any drinkin' until the next freight wagon arrives! The barrel is broke an' the whiskey run through the cracks in the floor. On top of that, yew got a broken arm an' three broken fingers. How'n thunderation yew goin' to dig gold out'a Inheritance Claim? Yew only got thirty days an' it takes longer'n thet for a broken bone to heal!"

"Don't know, Dredger, but I'll figger out somethin'. Reminds me of the time I was trappin' with the mountain men. Broke both laigs, four hundred miles from the nearest post. Started to snow an' got real cold. Started crawlin' toward thet tradin' post, covered about a mile an' went through the ice on the Heavy Dew River. Got dragged along the rocks under the ice by thet cold water right into a beaver colony. The beavers must'a thought I was a log an' steered me into the dam they was a'buildin'. Covered me with warm mud, left me a breathin' hole, an' danged if'n I didn't lay there 'til spring thaw! Some fellers come along an' dug me out, fit as a fiddle an'..."

The crowd laughed but Dredger snarled. "I kin believe thet story 'cause yew bin smellin' like a beaver ever since! But, thet's enough of yore lies; lets git yew an' thet railroad man upstairs. Can't have the bar cluttered up with cripples. Hey you, Johnny," he called to the swam-

per, "sweep up them nuggets off'n Coffee's gold watch chain an' hide 'em before somebody thinks we got a gold mine here an' stakes out a claim."

* * *

THE DAYS passed and Digger was up and around, one arm in a sling and his other hand covered with splints to hold his three broken fingers. Coffee had been called for by railroad doctors and was resting in a Company hospital at Colfax. Digger grew morose and spent most of his time dipping his tin cup in the new whiskey barrel. The thumb and forefinger were still usable and he held his own with the hard drinking miners. Many of his friends suggested he ignore the deal he had made with Coffee; they felt that Coffee had deliberately injured Digger after he had signed the paper, and thought the deal shouldn't take effect until after the miner had recovered the use of his hands. Dredger put it into words.

"Yew danged fool, couldn't yew see thet Coffee never intended to give yew a chanc't to do any diggin' in thet claim? He got yore name on thet paper and then got yore guard down so's he could smack yew with the lantern. Meant to bust yew up all the time! Figured he'd be able to run yew out'a the mountains and git his dang roadbed finished. Therefore, he warn't makin' a fair bargain in the fust place so yew kin refuse to live up to yore end of it an' nobody'll think a thang of it!"

"I think yore right about his plan but I signed the paper," answered Digger John, and the bargain still sticks. I'll git the gold outa thet claim or I'll leave these dang mountains, in thirty days! If'n I welsh on my word then ..."

"All right, all right!" shouted Dredger. "Go ahead an' start diggin' instead of drinkin' all'a my whiskey. If'n yew'd dig with a teaspoon into thet claim as hard as yore dippin' into this whiskey barrel, yew'd move Mount Baldy in thirty days!"

The boom of a cannon interrupted the argument and the people in the bar rushed to the door to see what was going on. Slim Deakins shouted from the firehouse. "Come on over, see our new fire alarm!"

"What yew gonna try next?" laughed Dredger Dan. "Gonna shoot out the fires now?"

"No," answered Slim, "but those trains have a bell that sounds like our firebell and we figured this cannon would do the trick. Fellows down in the hydraulic diggings come running every time the train goes by. Then, they'd get so mad, after running all that distance, we'd have to buy them a few drinks to cool them off. This way, they'll only come when the cannon goes off and the fire company won't be spending all it's money on drinks. Pretty, isn't she?" Slim fondly stroked the sleek black barrel. "Got the idea from the fire company over in Little York. They had a bell a'top a ninty foot pole but one night a teamster needed a rope to tie his team and shinnied up the pole and cut the rope off, near the top. That night fire broke out, when the hotel stove exploded and they wasn't a man able to climb that ninty foot pole to ring the bell. They figured a cannon would always be on the ground and nobody'd be able to steal her." He paused. "Say Digger John, isn't this the twenty-ninth day of the thirty days you had to mine those ten ounces out of the Inheritance Claim?"

"Yup," John answered dejectedly, "she's the twenty-ninth day an' I ain't even got the splint off'n this arm yet. The fingers is pretty good but yew can't use a pick and shovel with one hand, let alone a gold pan. Looks like thet Coffee guy fixed me up fer sure. I'll be leavin' Gold Run tomorrow I guess."

* * *

DIGGER'S thirtieth day, broke bright and clear and, as he crossed the street from his adobe house to Dredger's bar, he could tell something had happened during the night because the bar was filled to overflowing. The crowd hushed as Digger entered and he marched directly to the whiskey barrel, care-

fully dipped his tin cup, drained it and refilled. This ritual passed, he turned, leaning his elbows on the bar and spoke. "It shore is a pleasure to know yew all come to big me goodbye. I've made Gold Run my home fer ten years but they ain't no use of makin' a speech, I'll just say goodbye an'...."

'Yore leavin'," snorted Dredger, "didn't have nothin' to do with this gatherin'. Somebody stole the fire a search party. Musta bin them Dutch canon! Men are gittin' ready to form Flat...."

"That's right," interrupted Slim Deakins. "They must have drug it away last night and hid it out in the brush somewhere. We'll scatter, and the man that finds the canon can shoot her off. Then, we'll all come running and help drag her back. Man that finds the canon'll get...."

"Free drinks fer a week!" pledged Dredger Dan. "He kin stand right up to the bar an' drink all he kin hold fer a whole week!"

The men whooped and scattered. As the day wore on, the news spread through the canyons. Prospectors, on the north fork of the American River, crawled out of their holes and joined in the search. Hydraulic miners left their monitors and china boys deserted the railroads. The railroad men shut off the steam and tramped through the willows along the tracks. The town of Gold Run was deserted. Digger alone remained and drank deep from the open barrel in Dredger's bar.

As the sun started to set he left the bar, straddled his mule bareback and headed down toward Canyon Creek. As he rode, he hummed a tune. He arrived at Inheritance Claim and, in a few minutes, a rumbling canon boomed through the still Sierras. The rumble echoed and the searching men cursed and tramped toward Canyon Creek, wondering who the lucky man was.

The first to arrive found Digger John squatting against the face of the Inheritance claim and digging nonchalantly with a teaspoon. The men gathered and watched. Slim Deakins pushed through the crowd and shouted; "What's going on Digger? Did you steal the canon to...."

"Wal, Slim, I'll tell yew," explained Digger; "I gotta git ten ounces of gold out'a this claim. Thet's dang near impossible with a busted arm an' a busted hands unless yew use yore brains. I bin figurin' fer almost thuty days how I was goin' to do her an' it looked like I was licked until yew showed up with yore canon. Then, she hit me! All I needed was ten ounces an' I could blow it into this claim an' dig her out, even if I only can use two fingers. But, I had a turrible time gettin' the ten ounces. Finally, I found thet watch chain of Cofee's in the bottom of Dredger's barrel, where the swamper hit it, an' thet settled my problem. See here?" He held up a nugget with a hole bored through it's center. "Thar's the last one. Thet makes ten ounces. Yessir, I stole yore cannon an' fired her up, put the nuggets into the muzzle an' blew the gold into the wall an' now I've dug the gold out'a the claim. I don't have to leave Gold Run an' Dredger owes me a week's free drinks 'cause I found yore dang canon! Thet right, Dredger?"

Dredger scowled, looked around at the grinning miners, and sadly nodded.

Eel Tyler went for his guns as Cain knew he would.

Range of Forgotten Law

by LEE FLOREN

(Author of "Judge Bates' Trigger Trap")

"This is a new country, but they're bringing old hatreds into it. There's a little law here, but not very much; I know my limitations, and I'm staying within them. I'll see to it you ain't up against unfair odds, but once the odds are even, then the law's in your holster!"

THERE WAS dust. Dust murmuring against his brush-scarred boots. Dust in the harsh wind that was sandpaper against his cheeks. Dust in his nostrils and on his wind-cracked lips.

A harsh voice cut through the dust. "Cain! Turn around, Jim Cain"

The words turned him. He pivoted, bootheels in dust. A man stood across the street—a squat, tough-looking man—and Cain felt the touch of danger. Then he recognized him.

His lips moved, but no sound came. But inside a voice said, "Eeler Tyler, Jim Cain, so watch his gun." Jim wet his lips, watching Tyler; he said, "What's your purpose in this town?"

"Are you the town marshal?"

"I asked you a question."

Behind Cain the dust grated against the unpainted sides of the General

Store. The wind sang against the siding with a lonesome sound.

"What's your purpose?" Cain snarled the words now.

One hundred feet between them, and the dust was in it, but still he could see Eel Tyler's broad ugly face. And in that dust, too, was almost a decade of years since they had last met.

Tyler's broad thumbs rested on his cartridge-filled gun-belt, jabbing toward Jim Cain; Tyler's lips moved and the words jabbed across the dust and wind. "Vern Browning is settled north of here on Bitter Crick, Cain. Moved in about a month ago, they told me down south. I was ridin' through to see him an' here you come into this burg big as life. You came up to gun-down Vern Browning?"

Cain spoke truthfully. "I never knew Browning was on this grass."

Tyler spat. "On this *dust*, you mean?" His eyes did not leave Jim. "Well, there's no use us talkin' about it. You boys run off on me down on the Strip an' I spent seven years in that cell." His voice cracked slightly; then, Eel Tyler went for his guns.

He was the old Eel Tyler, big and tough, and fast. He had looked through powdersmoke too many times and this was only repetition to him. His guns reared up, the movement liquid and swift; they cleared holsters a scant fraction, then spoke with a kicking belch.

One lead smashed into the store behind Cain; the other ripped into the plank sidewalk. Then Eel Tyler seemed to lean against the wind. His mouth came open, and Cain saw terror and disbelief mirrored in his suddenly wide eyes. And Jim Cain took no chances.

Eel Tyler was all killer; he'd kill as long as reflex action could tug a trigger. Cain placed another shot. Tyler bent into the wind, the dust whipped in, and when it cleared Tyler lay on his belly.

Cain let his gun droop. The Colt hung from his forefinger. He was sick inside, and this showed on his thin, leathery face as he looked at Tyler. He had known all the time that, when and if he and Eel met again, this would be the end: one of them, down in the dust.

WIND RUFFLED Tyler's flannel shirt. Already dust had started to drift against him. A hard hand clutched Jim Cain's shirt. Cain turned, gun starting up; he caught himself, though.

"What the hell happened?"

This was the town marshal, a gaunt, sallow man. Cain looked at him almost dazedly.

"What drove him to pull against you, Cain?"

Cain growled, "You ask too many questions!"

"My job is to keep peace. Now answer me, by hell, or I'll jug you. One bullet went through the corner of the store; had there been a customer on that spot it would have hit him."

"But there wasn't a customer...."

Men and women stood on the sidewalks, watching them. The wind whipped in and pushed a dress against a long thigh of the waitress at the Coffee Cup. A red-faced man, evidently a cowman, moved over and looked at Eel Tyler. Cain watched him squat.

The man looked at Cain. "He's dead."

Cain nodded.

The marshal's fingers jerked harder; Cain tore his arm free. "He knew me from down in Texas," he said slowly.

The marshal stepped back. Anger drained from his face and he said quietly, "An old score, huh? They carry Texas into Montana sometime."

Cain nodded. "Is that enough?" He looked flatly at the marshal.

The marshal's face showed things; he was remembering the speed of Jim Cain's gun, the man's wiry strength as he had wrenched his hand free. "I wonder if he has money enough on him to bury him?"

"Search him."

Jim punched the two fired cartridges out of the Colt, pulled shells from his gun-belt and reloaded. The thick man who had knelt beside Eel

Tyler kept watching him with a certain scrutiny that rubbed against Jim Cain.

"Know me the next time you see me, fella?"

"I reckon so."

Their gazes locked for a long second. Cain ripped his gaze away and looked at the waitress. He wished she were closer; he'd like to read her eyes.

He went into the Broken Bottle Saloon.

DUST ON the table-top. And a stubby finger traced a pattern through it. A brand. The A Lazy V Bar. "My iron, Cain. North of here on the Little Willow river. I run about five thousan' head, trailed in from aroun' Amarillo."

"Where do I fit in?"

The stocky man ran his fingers across his blocky jaw. He had that same look in his eyes that he had held as he had knelt beside the dead Eel Tyler. "You hate Vern Browning, Cain."

"What the hell you talkin' about?"

A thick forefinger retraced the brand in the dust. "I heard every word you had with Eel Tyler. I was standin' in the door of the Silver Dollar when you rode into town. Tyler was standing there, too."

Cain listened, watching him.

"Tyler said, 'There's a son of a buck that double-dealed me down south. I come up here to kill Browning. This Jim Cain fella must be Vern's partner yet.'"

"He was wrong on that point, Hayward."

Ed Hayward nodded. "I'm glad to hear that. I've got no love for Browning, either. He moved right in on my range. Run up bobwire an' my bluejoint grass is his, now."

Jim Cain understood. He knew, now, what this was leading up to; he leaned back silently.

Hayward continued quietly. "From what I hear, you've been around this country for over a year. Took up a homestead out on Big Muddy. You never knew that Vern Browning had trailed in until Tyler told you."

Cain nodded.

Hayward looked slowly around the saloon. "I want that hay land back; I want Browning out of the way. I was going to make a proposition to Tyler, but he saw you then....and your lead silenced him."

"The deal."

"Kill Browning. Kill him for yourself....and for me."

Outside dust grated against the building. Dust seeped in under windows. When a man came in dust whipped in around him.

"You afraid of him?"

"He's a gunman," Ed Hayward said. "A killer."

"Then I'm a killer, too?"

"Takes a killer to kill a killer."

Cain pretended interest. Inside he was cold and dangerous. He was remembering the wind, and a dress pushed by the wind against a woman's thigh, and he was remembering her eyes. What had they held back there when he had reloaded his smoking gun? Fear? Hate? Sorrow?

Cain played along. "Tell me more?"

Browning had cut hay and stacked it. He was asking a high price for that bluejoint hay. He'd built his cabin and barn and corrals around water and water on the northern end of this range was priceless.

"He wants so much a head to water my stock."

"Why don't you pay it?"

"I pay for no water I hold under squatter's rights."

"But you don't hold it....now." Cain's voice was level. Hayward was silent.

Cain played further. "How much?"

"A thousand, and Browning dead."

Cain got up slowly, seemingly thinking this over. Then his right fist went out. It licked out savagely, unexpected. Hayward's hand went up to block. Cain's fist smashed across it.

The blow knocked Hayward back, chair and all. Cain cat-jumped around the table. Hayward lay on the floor on his back. Surprise and anger were scrawled across his blocky face.

Cain said, "Nobody buys my gun."

Hayward watched him, hate there.

He made no move for his gun.

Cain snarled, "Did you hear me?"

"I heard you."

CAIN SAID, "Tyler came up north to kill a man named Vern Browning, Marshal; this is the first time I've known Browning was on Bitter Crick."

The marshal brushed dust from his sleeve. "What do you want me to do, Cain?"

"I've been on your range for a year. I've been law-abiding until today and today I pulled to protect my life."

"What does this add up to?"

"I don't want to kill Browning."

The marshal rubbed grit between his fingers. "Once you wanted to kill Browning?"

Cain's arm made a vague gesture. "That's beside the point. But Browning might get afraid, when he hears I killed Tyler; he might jump his breechin' an' come in after me."

"You don't want that to happen."

"No.'

The marshal leaned back in his chair. This Montana territory was raw and young and old troubles now rode its dust and grass. Texas men and Texas cattle had come in and some of the Texas men had stayed for reasons known to themselves and guessed at by their neighbors.

"You want me to talk to Browning? Is that it? Tell him you pack no gun against him?'

Cain nodded.

"A long ride," the marshal said. At heart, he was good; he was solid. "But to save a man's life I'd ride to hell."

The marshal pulled on his chaps.

"Take two men with you?"

The lawman was on one knee buckling his chaps. He looked at Cain with a long inquisitive glance.

"Ed Hayward?"

"Hayward wants that hay. And with Browning off the place, something might happen."

"I take two men."

The marshal got his Winchester, slapped open the breech. "I leave the two men there—until this is settled."

"Browning has a wife and two kids. Don't get them riled up, marshal."

"I understand."

The marshal went out the back to his stable and Cain went out the front. Soon the lawmen and two others rode by. The marshal lifted his hand slightly and Cain returned the gesture.

A MAN watched from the doorway of the Silver Dollar. He was tall and gaunt, with sunken deep eyes. He jerked a thumb toward the retreating trio. "Where they goin'?"

Cain stopped. "Out to Vern Browning's. Vern is comin' into town."

"Three men to take him in?"

"You ask questions."

"You aim to get Browning into town an' kill him?"

Cain asked, "Who are you?"

Sunken eyes touched him. "Mutt Immenshank."

"I don't know you."

"I ride for Ed Hayward."

Cain understood. "Browning and me packed a feud, once, but that's gone; if I rode up to Browning's spread, he might think I rode to call him and shoot me down out of horse. Browning's got a lot to fight for. He might be spooky."

"Three men to take him into town."

"The other two," Cain said, "they stay to watch that hay and the buildings. Hayward."

"Hayward," Mutt Immenshank repeated.

Cain left him there. And he knew Mutt Immenshank was still watching him, weighing him, judging him.

* * *

Jim Cain rubbed dust from his sleeve. "I've wanted to talk to you, Myra. For a long time now, I've wanted that."

Myra Clovis said, smiling, "But you have talked to me many times, Jim; I don't understand you."

"I think you do."

He watched her small, dark face. And her eyes showed she knew what he meant. She spoke slowly. "Yes, I guess I do."

Outside, the wind sang its endless song in the eaves. This kitchen was full of warmth and the smell of cook-

ing, of spices. Jim Cain liked the warmth and the spices. They reminded him of his mother's home, and that seemed an eternity away. A million years back along a trail that twisted and had no end.

"This morning I killed a man, Myra. I saw you standing in the crowd. I couldn't see your eyes; I wondered what you thought about me, then."

"You did it in self defense."

"Thanks," he murmured.

This was the slack hour between dinner and supper and the string of stools beyond the swinging door was empty of customers. The cook had gone home for his afternoon nap.

"For a year now I've been silent. I've watched you and wanted you. But still, I had to keep silent."

"Silence isn't good for a man's soul."

Jim Cain smiled slightly. "Some say I have no soul." Again he made that quick gesture. "This town has sat back, and you have sat back, and this town and you have wondered about me."

"Every town does that, Jim."

Again that gesture. "Let me tell you something. I know it will never go beyond you."

She waited, watching him.

THERE WAS Texas and its dust, and there were cattle and horses and buckbrush. There was a ranch on the Red River. There was the bloody, useless Civil War. Then, there was Appomattox. "They took everything. They rode in raiding parties. My mother, luckily, died when I was at Lookout Mountain. They raided my dad's outfit that dark night. Over a hundred of them."

There had been a man, his father, who had died with bullets, there between the corral and the house as he'd run for his rifle. There had been the pitched fight, and finally the raiders' fiery torch.

"I got him out, Myra, and I buried him in the brush along the Red. What was there for me to do? I guess I went wild and torn inside."

"You were young, Jim."

"Yes, and youth is wild."

There had been a bank, and there had been more gunplay. Another bank, and still another; there was Eeler Tyler, too, now.

"Then Vern Browning hooked up with us. And that day we hit a town in the brush country." Again, that gesture. "I'll remember its name forever. Singleshot, Texas."

"Vern Browning's first raid?"

"Yes, his first and last."

Browning out there by the hitch-rack, holding the get-a-way broncs. And the thing going wrong, the smash of guns.

"We got out with it, though. Tyler had one through the belly. We came out there and I got my bronc and Vern Browning thought we were all in saddle. We pulled out, and Tyler missed his stirrup."

There was Vern Browning, spurring out of Singleshot, and there was Eeler Tyler's terrified bronc, running empty and wild after Browning. And there was Tyler, there on the street, his gun empty.

"I swung back and picked him up and we made it. But no hoss can carry double long and I had to leave him in the brush at an outpost camp. They trailed me that night and I got sick inside."

He paused. She was silent.

"It came over me fast, and it was wild in me. I swung north and got out of Texas. For years I punched cows; then I heard they'd run across Eel Tyler, and he was in the pen."

"The money?"

"Browning mailed it back; I heard that later. I never saw Browning again, never heard of him until today, never knew he was on Bitter Crick. I've stayed close to my claim. I thought perhaps Browning had changed his name. But what is the use of changing a name? This country is new and rough and half the men in its stirrups are wanted."

"Did you kill anybody in a hold-up?"

"No. I shot to wound only."

She wiped a butcher-knife with a clean cloth. "Now it's all rushed up on you, Jim. Tyler wanted to kill Browning, and he wanted to kill you.

And you and Browning—?" The question mirrored in her dark eyes.

"No grudge. He had more sense than I had."

Relief showed across those eyes.

"Browning had a sweetheart. I remember her. Some ways, you remind me of her. Later on, I heard that girl had left this Texas town. Then I heard later she had two children."

"Browning's wife and children."

He nodded.

"Now Vern is in danger. I knew that girl, and would have stepped in, maybe, except for those other days, and Vern already had her. When I came here the first day I saw you I told myself, 'I'm glad I didn't step in.'"

"Why do you tell me this, Jim?"

"Browning loves that girl. Now she's his wife and mothers his children. Once in those wild days those thoughts wouldn't have much meaning. Now Ed Hayward aims to kill Browning. He's one man, alone. And his wife and children—"

"What can I do, Jim?"

"You can tell me you care for me."

The butcher-knife slipped from her fingers, clattered to the floor. He felt the push of her and after a while he looked over her shoulder. From here he could see over the door into the dining-room.

Two men walked slowly by the front of the cafe. One was short, rolling; the other gaunt, stooped, deadly. One was Ed Hayward; the other was the killer known as Mutt Immenshank.

They could not see into the kitchen.

Dust whipped across the main-street.

* * *

TWO MEN rode down that dusty main-stem. They pulled in where Jim Cain stood in front of a saloon.

"A long ride," the marshal said.

Cain paid no attention to the words. He looked at Vern Browning and Browning looked at him. And across the street Ed Hayward and Mutt Immenshank watched.

Browning had changed. He was stockier, and a touch of gray was in his sorrel hair that curled from under the Stetson's rim. But then, Jim Cain thought, "I've changed, too."

"The marshal told me," Browning said.

The lawman looked at Hayward and Immenshank. "Two to two," he murmured. "A fair fight." He had literally washed his hands of the affair. The odds were even, now; the law could only go so far.

The marshal rode toward his barn.

Vern Browning came down. He said, "Jim, I never knew you were on this range. I've been afraid, Jim."

"Of me."

"Yes, afraid; you see, I'm established now. You remember Vivian Webster, don't you?"

Jim nodded. He remembered Myra Clovis, too; she would be watching from her cafe window. He didn't look that way; he didn't want to see the look in her eyes. He kept his gaze on Hayward and Immenshank.

"You married her?"

"Yes. And when a man gets married—and has two kids like we have—" Vern Browning searched for words. "It's hard to put across, Jim."

Jim Cain still remembered Myra. "Not so hard, Vern."

Browning smiled. "Lord, who'd figure it would end like this with you an' me friends, Jim. I'd 've had to cross guns with Eeler Tyler if it hadn't been for you. This whole thing piled up on us."

"Tyler hated you; but he hated me more."

The thought of Myra Clovis was warm in Jim Cain's memory. He was going into this gun fight, walking into it for Browning, for the girl whose maiden name had been Vivian Webster. But there was more than that. He knew that.

There in the saloon, when he had crossed Ed Hayward, he had signed his warrant here on this dusty range. Hayward would move against him for Hayward had pride, and that pride had lain with the cattleman on the floor of that saloon. Hayward was a cowman. And the grazing grounds of the cowmen were in danger from

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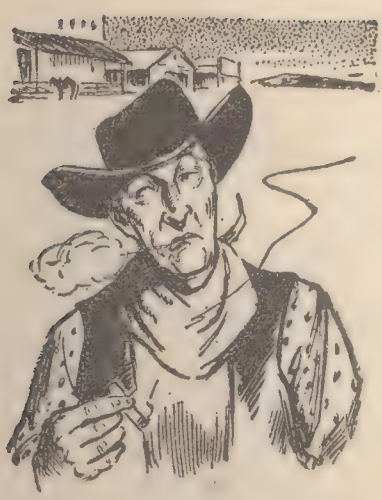

the Cheater

by William Stephen Gamble

Jeff had a way of spotting a cheat, even when the hand was quicker than the eye!

WHEN Ed McDoo announced that the winner of the contest would get five hundred dollars, every man who could make the trip to McDoo's saloon entered it. Five hundred dollars west of the Mississippi at that time was *plenty* of jack.

It had taken a long time to eliminate 157 of the 159 contestants, but to Ed McDoo this was time well spent. You see, Ed ran a saloon and gambling parlor down on Furnace Street; in order to stimulate business he had started a contest to find the best card player in town. The contest had made a lot of new gambling addicts, and those that didn't care for this particular vice were lured into the drinking rooms. Considering the gimmick from all sides, McDoo was well pleased with the results.

A crowd of spectators had already gathered in the saloon's gambling room, for this was the day of the last round of the contest. Seated across from each other at a table in the middle of the ring of onlookers were two men. They were dressed in chaps and neckerchiefs, the mark of the cowboy. Each glowed with confidence and stared disdainfully at his opponent. In the middle of the table was a deck of brand-new cards, neatly stacked and carefully placed.

Jeff Hegan, the cowboy seated on the right, had worry-lines on his forehead. He was thinking of his pretty wife, Anna, and their four young 'uns. Jeff needed the prize money...

Rudy, the boy on the left, made no mention of the reason why he needed the money; but everyone needs money for something.

McDoo peered into the room from a back door. Yep, the time was ripe. No use waiting any longer for more people to show up, not many would; no use in making the people that were there wait, some of them might leave. Yep, McDoo was shrewd all right.

He let spit a chaw of tobacco, and then strolled into the midst of the crowd of people and motioned for them to quiet down. "They ain't no rules, boys," he said, talking to Jeff and Rudy at the card table, "except-in' Hoyle's. Start playin'."

JEFF REACHED out and cut the cards. "There 'tis—the ace o' spades," he said, holding the card high for everyone to see. "He cain't beat thet."

"Ain't particular if I do," muttered Rudy. "I wan't hankerin' for the fust deal noways."

Rudy made a swift cut at the cards just for luck. He came up with a low card, and Jeff took the deck and began shuffling it. "I notice you got somethin' writ on that thar kerchieft 'round yore neck. What do it say?" asked Jeff.

"It says, *'The man who cheats first-*

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Virginia City-

The Roaring Camp

by
JAMES
A. HINES

A True Fact Feature

JAMES Fenimore was dog drunk in Broncho Sall's saloon in Silver City. But it was nothing uncommon to see "Ol' Virginny," as his friends called him, to go on long toots. For Ol' Virginny was just a wanderer who hailed from the state of Virginia. He was just another miner in Silver City.

"Hic! Hic! I'm a-goin' home. Hic!" muttered Fenimore to his carousing miner friends. He picked up a bottle of forty rod and waved it around over his head.

"Ah, stay here with us, Virginny. It's early in the night yet," chorused his companions.

"Hic! Gotta go, hic!" mumbled Virginny, as he walked with unsteady steps toward the door of the saloon, swinging a quart liquor bottle by the neck. Once outside the door he headed in a weaving line toward his cabin up the mountainside.

Due to the intoxicated state in which he was in Virginny saw two huge rocks lying in the road in front of him; he decided to go between them. It was only one boulder and Virginny stumbled over it, falling down and bursting his bottle of whiskey.

Always a man who was never at loss for words he arose and yelled out in a loud voice which could be heard all over camp: "I christen this ground Virginia!"

"Virginia City!" howled the camp of miners.

So Virginia City it was. The name caught on and spread like wildfire and from that said day on the camp became Virginia City.

YES, VIRGINIA City, Nevada, the town with the sage brush scent, once the center of the greatest mining activity in North America, sets high on the slope of Sun Mountain—now named Mount Davidson. At one time this little town lying sprawled in the canyons and along the scarred mountainside was the greatest mining camp in America!

In 1874, the famous Comstock Lode had already produced a quarter-billion in bullion. In January 1859, a rich deposit of gold was struck in placer diggings on a small eminent above Gold Canyon, which was immediately named Gold Hill. A tough, rip-roaring, mining-camp sprang up overnight.

No one can say with certainty who discovered the Comstock Lode but it bears the name of Henry T. P. Comstock, who had come west as a trapper. When the miners began swarming to the Lode in 1859, Comstock was already there claiming everything in sight. "Ol' Pancake," as Comstock was called by his close associates might not have been the first discoverer of the lode but he was one of the first locaters on the great vein.

In this rip-snorting town in its prosperous years almost every man and woman speculated in mining shares. Female domestic servants earning from $50. to $75. a month made vast fortunes. Others were offered the tremendous and unbelievable sums of $100,000 and did not accept it and held onto their stock, waiting for better offers and died poor. That was the way of life in Virginia City—the poor became rich and the rich became poor.

In 1873, there came the Big Bonanza, known as the greatest body of gold and silver ore ever found on the earth! The stock of the Consolidated Virginia and the Consolidated California, which together owned the bonanza, had a total stock exchange value of $159,000,000. The Bonanza Kings, who were Fair, O'Brien, Flood and Mackay, had been able to buy control of the two mines for $100,000 only two years before the great discovery was made.

* * *

IN 1861 Nevada was organized as a territory and was admitted to the Union as a state on October 31, 1864, at the height of the Civil War. Virginia City favored the Union and two regiments were raised and sent to Fort Churchill. Throughout the great conflict the Comstock was producing treasure which helped the Union mightily to win the ultimate victory.

During the Civil War, Virginia City was at its most troublesome peak. In 1860 there was a war with the Piute Indians but they were soon whipped and the new town roared on. Nothing on the face of the earth could stop this fast growing town. It boasted many substantial structures. Mines were being developed and money flowed freely. An agile youngster could pick up $20. a day running errands. Comstockers hired gunfighters at $40. a day to protect their claims. No saloon keeper was expected to give change for a $5 gold piece and change of any sort was scarcer then

fleas on a hound dog in that high altitude.

The $5 dances of the Ivy Social Club could always be depended upon for some daring novelty. As on one occasion when the committee collected all the canaries in town—almost every Virginia City household had one—kept them with an attendant for a few days in a dark cellar, and then hung the cages in rows from the ceiling of the armory. One old-timer remarked: "By jacks, we shore didn't much need the orchestra thet nite!"

Virginia City became so bad that in the spring of 1871, a Vigilance Committee, which became known as the famous "601" took charge and cleaned up much of the lawless element of the camp. Although all of the rough element was never done away with the place took on a little more civilized attitude and things became much more quiet. At last the camp began to show some marks of civilization—churches, societies, clubs, theaters, etc., sprang up.

By 1878, Virginia City had 20 laundries, 8 dairies, 1 josshouse, 4 hay-yards, 50 dry-goods merchants, 2 pawnbrokers, 4 banks, 6 churches, 150 places where liquor was sold, 11 faro games, 1 keno and 2 pan games, 30 lodging and boarding houses, 2 homeopathic doctors and 35 physician-surgeons.

YES, DURING Virginia City's wild years many men were planted in boothill by violent deaths. One of the headboards on a lone Comstockers grave read:

He had sand in his craw,
But was slow on the draw,
So we planted him under the daisies.

Rough-and-ready justice was meted out at times. In 1871, a hombre named Perkins sometimes called Heffernan, was caught by the Vigilantes for some fancied insult. He was hanged. As the body jerked clear, a fusillade of shots were fired into by some of Virginia City's leading citizens.

Many of the fights or killings were in hot blood during the course of gambling, especially when the players were full of rotgut whiskey.

Mark Twain, in that famous classic, *Roughing It,* presents spirited and accurate details about some of the early killers in Comstock. The Comstock had its share of the badmen although it boasted no bandits of epic fame such as Jesse James, Wild Bill Hickok, Billy the Kid, etc.

In the wild days of Virginia City one supposed badman entered the doors of the Missouri Saloon with a swagger. He walked up to the bar took a six shooter and pounded on the bar until the glasses danced. He announced in a loud voice: "I'm a roarin' ripsnorter from a hoorah camp, an' I can't be stepped on. I'm an angel from Paradise Valley an' when I flop my wings there's a tornado loose. I'm a tough customer to clean up after. Give me some of your meanist whiskey, a whole lot of that tastes like bumble-bee stings pickled in vitriol. I swallered a cyclone fer lunch, an' hain't began to cough yet. Don't crowd me! Get a move on thar', bartender!"

After the shaking bartender hastily poured the badman's drink, he gulped it down, turned and sauntered out of the saloon.

TODAY YOU will find much of Virginia City gone but to those who have imagination the most important part of the city is there.

Even today along the Mother Lode you are liable to see an old white-whiskered prospector still panning for color on the river flats and up the gulches always dreaming of finding the lucky strike.

Today Virginia City where once the mountainside shook and echoed with the stamps of a score of mills is silent. Virginia City is now shrunken and old—but not yet dead. Many of the old buildings have been torn down for firewood. Others have rotted and decayed and fallen in. Some have weathered the storm of time and are still being used by the

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The desert was father, mother, sister, brother, and home to him. Then, one day he found the gold he sought, and thought to leave!

"How much would Emery pay for my mine?" he demanded

He Only Knew The Desert

by H. A. De ROSSO

MR. HEMBROOK said, "And now, Mr. Saunders—ah, Seldom—you don't mind if I call you Seldom? I detest formality, ha, ha—now, ah, Seldom, I presume you know why I asked you to call on me?"

Seldom Saunders didn't like the feel of the chair; it was hard and tiresome and he knew the urge to squirm around on it like a restless child but supposed that wouldn't be proper. The room itself, the confining walls, the musty smells of dried wood and paper and ink were beginning to weigh depressively on him even though he couldn't have been here more than five minutes.

He was a small, wizened man, the sombre placidness of the desert in his pale blue eyes, and the vagrant wind of it in the wrinkles of his sun-blackened face. The whiskers rimming his jaw and mouth were white and strangely clean against the dark, sand-pitted features.

"Yes sir, ah, Seldom," said Mr.

Hembrook. "The assay reports on these ore samples are encouraging. Of course, one can't go overboard on just a few pieces of rock, can one? Ha, ha. You know how it is; one may encounter a fault in the vein at any time or the rest of the ore may not assay as well and similar circumstances. But, ha, ha, who am I to be telling you these things, ah, Seldom? Tell me, how long have you been prospecting?"

"I'd put it around forty years, Mr. Hembrook," said Seldom.

On the wall behind Hembrook's chair, there was a big real estate calendar with the picture of a bear and her two cubs crossing a log across a stream. Seldom kept looking at it; that was much easier than staring at Hembrook.

Mr. Hembrook sat back in his swivel chair, pudgy hands folded complacently over his paunch. His face was large and round and red with small, glittering eyes almost buried beneath pouchy eyelids; his jowls flowed down over the stiff white collar of his shirt., "Forty years," he murmured. The diamond in the ring on one of his fingers flashed dazzingly in the sun streaming in through the window. "A very long time, isn't it, ah, Seldom? Is this your first strike, or, should I say, this is what you hope, ha, ha, will be your first strike?"

"I've had others," said Seldom. "but they were all small; nothing more than pay me some good wages." He dared to wriggle forward in his chair, teetering there on the edge, and his voice became very earnest. "But this one is big, Mr. Hembrook. I know good rock when I see it. This—this will be like another Tombstone, another Wickenburg!"

"Ha, ha," said Mr. Hembrook. "You irrepressible old-timers—always so optimistic. Ha ha, I envy you; I really do. Ah, Seldom—of course, you know, one can't very accurately predict the future, can one? There have been many, many strikes that have boomed to fantastic proportions only to have the vein suddenly vanish. Wickenburg was like that, was it not, ah, Seldom?"

"Sure," admitted Seldom, squirming uncomfortably on the rim of the chair, "but look at the millions they took out before the strike died down. Look at the money they made. Now I know my discovery is something big. Forty years I've been wandering the desert, Mr. Hembrook, and I ain't ever seen or heard of rock like this."

"Of course," said Mr. Hembrook, the chair creaking as he shifted his weight. "Ha, ha. But this all entails a high degree of speculation, ah, Seldom. Where did you say these samples came from?"

"The Desolation Range."

"The Desolations? Hardly an alluring name. Ha, ha." He finally lifted a fat hand off his paunch and began picking at his nose. "How far would that be from the nearest railroad, ah, Seldom?"

"About ninety miles."

"Ninety? Ha, ha," said Mr. Hembrook. "Perhaps we could use mule teams but they are very slow and cumbersome and actually outmoded by now. A railroad could move vast amounts of ore and supplies both rapidly and efficiently. Ha, ha. But it takes money to build a railroad, ah, Seldom."

"I know, Mr. Hembrook, but those rocks are so rich—"

"Ha, ha. Good for you, ah, Seldom. You're a shrewd dealer. I like to see a man like that; I like to see a man stick up for himself. Ha, ha. You have fair ore, ah, Seldom. Promising. Very promising, I'll venture to say. But, ha, ha, its ultimate and actual wealth remains pure speculation."

SELDOM settled back in the chair. A feeling of a faint, irascible hopelessness began stirring in him. He knew an instant of fierce, unfathomable anger but he forced it from him. His voice he kept as humble as he could. "I thought you liked the looks of the ore, Mr. Hembrook; the assay reports are very good."

"True, ah, Seldom, true," said Mr. Hembrook, placing his hand back on his paunch again. "But what else have you to show me? Just a few pieces of promising gold-bearing rock. To develop it, what must I do? I must con-

struct a railroad; I must build a town; I must haul in machinery and supplies. Ha, ha. I must gamble a fortune. If I lose, my whole life is ruined. Ha, ha. It is an extremely difficult decision to make. Yes, indeed."

Seldom looked at the floor. He saw now how it would be with Blair Hembrook. Those moments of wild exhiliration seemed like unreal dreams to Seldom now; he should have known better than to dream like that. "I thought you wanted to buy my mine," said Seldom.

"Mine? Ha, ha, ha," said Mr. Hembrook. "A location in the Desolations with just your monuments on it and you call it a mine, ah, Seldom? Ha, ha, ha. Seldom, ah, Seldom? Where are you going?"

Seldom paused halfway to the door. He said it over his shoulder. "There's nothing for me here."

"Now, ah, Seldom," said Mr. Hembrook hastily, "you've got me all wrong. Why, I, ha, ha, was just joshing. Of course, I'll buy your mine. Why, I'll pay you five hundred dollars for it. Think of that! Five hundred dollars..."

* * *

MR. MOREHOUSE said, "I see, I see." He kept clicking his plates, making sharp, irritating noises that grated on Seldom's ears. This chair seemed even harder than the one in Hembrook's office but maybe that was because Seldom wasn't accustomed to sitting so much.

He turned his head and looked out of the gray, unwashed window. The desert lay out there, interminably waiting, the sand nestling against the hungry roots of the sage and mesquite. The life that he knew was out there, in the waste and the desolation, in the overwhelming loneliness of the arid land.

"I see," said Mr. Morehouse. He was fingering the three fragments of ore. He scraped at one with a thumbnail. Dissatisfied, he picked up a letter opener and probed at the rock with the sharp tip. He held up the fragment in the light of the sun through the grimy window, studying the piece of ore through his steel-rimmed, thick-lensed spectacles. "Hmm," said Mr. Morehouse.

Seldom fidgeted a little in his chair. His clothes hung rather dejectedly on his slight, withered frame. He lifted a hand and smoothed the stark white whiskers. "The assay reports make it out very good ore, Mr. Morehouse," said Seldom half-apologetically.

"Hmm," said Mr. Morehouse, putting down the fragment of ore. Paper crackled loudly as he pawed at the sheets littering his desk. He finally selected one, lifted it up in front of his face. "I see," murmured Mr. Morehouse.

Seldom fidgeted some more in his chair. He cleared his throat and the sound of it was loud and strained in his ears.

Mr. Morehouse put the paper back on his desk. Through the thick lenses of his spectacles, his eyes seemed magnified to bilious extremes. He fixed that unwinking, owlish stare on Seldom. "Hmm," said Mr. Morehouse.

Seldom cleared his throat again and the effort seemed to hurt him a little. "It's good rock, Mr. Morehouse," said Seldom.

"Fair, Saunders, fair," said Mr. Morehouse. "Where is this rock from?"

"The Desolations."

"Very poor location, very poor," said Mr. Morehouse. He put his hands on his desk and pyramided the fingers. His thin mouth tightened severely and he clicked his teeth again. "Very much out of the way; barely accessible, I dare say."

"Couldn't a stamp mill be set up right out there?" said Seldom. "Then the ore wouldn't have to be shipped out."

"Very expensive, very," said Mr. Morehouse. "Would require much capital, very much"

"How about a railroad, maybe?" said Seldom.

"Ridiculously expensive; entirely out of the question," said Mr. Morehouse.

"You could use mule teams," said Seldom; "they did that in Death

Valley and it seemed to work out all right."

Mr. Morehouse's thin lips twitched spasmodically. "Too slow, Saunders, much too slow. Wouldn't pay. Wouldn't pay at all."

"Well," said Seldom dejectedly, "looks like I can't sell you on it, Mr. Morehouse." He got up from the chair and put on his old, battered felt hat. "Sorry to have bothered you, Mr. Morehouse."

Mr. Morehouse lifted a detaining hand. "Saunders," he said sharply. "One moment, Saunders." He smiled, a dead humorless grimace that revealed gold-filled teeth. "Be seated. Be seated, Saunders; I'm not through yet."

NOT TOO sanguinely Seldom went back to the chair. He sat down on the edge of it and began running the rim of his hat through his fingers. Mr. Morehouse showed that death's-head grin again. "Er, Saunders," began Mr. Morehouse. He paused and clicked his teeth a couple of times. "I was just being practical; I was just pointing out to you the difficulties that will be encountered in developing your, er, mine. Do you see, Saunders?"

Seldom nodded mutely.

"Good, good," said Mr. Morehouse. "I like to deal with a man of your perspicacity, Saunders. Tell me, what are your plans for your mine, eh?"

"Well," said Seldom slowly, "I'm just a prospector. I don't know much actually about mining. I know rock but I don't know much about running a mine. So I've figured on selling it to someone who does know something about mining."

"An astute decision. Yes, sir," said Mr. Morehouse. He moved forward a litt' ir his chair. "I see you're a sensible man, Saunders, very sensible. You agree, don't you, that you're in no position to develop your, er, mine? That requires much money, very much money. Entirely beyond your means. Isn't that so, Saunders?"

Seldom nodded.

"Now that's my business," said Mr. Morehouse. He spread his thin, bony hands. "I invest in promising property; I develop it. But it all entails a large degree of risk. Perhaps the property doesn't turn out to be as remunerative as the surface indications would show it to be. Yes, Saunders, the risk is great, very great."

Seldom hung his head, that enervating futility sweeping over him again. He listened dully to what Mr. Morehouse had to say.

Mr. Morehouse cleared his throat, loudly. "However, Saunders," he went on, "I'm willing to gamble in your case. The ore isn't too promising but it's fair, fair. It might possibly, mind you I said possibly, turn out fairly good." He cleared his throat again. "I'm prepared to be generous with you, Saunders, very generous."

Seldom looked up. A faint hope began to live in him and he smiled a little expectantly. "Yes, Mr. Morehouse?" he asked.

"It's more than it's worth," said Mr. Morehouse, "but I like to be generous, Saunders. I'll pay you seven hundred and fifty dollars..."

BETTE SAID, "Now, honey, you've got to be careful. It's a shame how these financiers try to take advantage of a poor old prospector. It makes me so *mad*, honey."

"He-he," said Seldom. "You're cute."

"You're cute, too," said Belle, smiling. She ran her fingers through Seldom's white, matted hair. "Don't you want another drink, honey?"

"Sure," said Seldom. "He-he. My glass is empty."

"Oh, darn it," said Belle. She got up from Seldom's lap and walked over to the door. She was rather plump and large-breasted. Her hair was a tawny yellow and her face was round and, to Seldom who never saw many women, quite attractive. She flung the door open and called: "Hey, Charlie! Bring us another round!"

Then she shut the door and came back to Seldom. She sat down in his lap and put her warm cheek against his whiskers. Seldom squeezed her.

"He-he," he said.

"Honey?" said Belle. "How much did Blair—Mr. Hembrook offer you for your mine?"

Seldom swore. Then he remembered Belle and mumbled an apology and swore again. "Five hundred dollars," he growled. "That's what he offered me. There's millions out there in the Desolations, millions; and he offered me five hundred dollars."

"Isn't it a *shame,* honey?" said Belle.

Seldom blinked his eyes owlishly. The thought came angling in to him through all the pleasant bleariness fogging his mind. He eyed Belle closely.

"But—but Mr. Hembrook introduced us. You—and him—"

Belle laughed gaily. "I'm just an acquaintance of Mr. Hembrook's. Besides, I like you, honey; I want to see that you get a square deal on your mine. Don't you want it like that, honey?"

She squeezed him back. "He-he," said Seldom. "Sure."

The door opened and Charlie came in. He put the drinks down, winked at Belle, and walked out. She handed a glass to Seldom. "Here you are, honey."

Seldom drank. He sighed with pleasure and hugged Belle again. "Did Mr. Morehouse offer you anything, honey?" Belle asked, stroking Seldom's whiskers.

"A little more."

"How much more, honey?"

"He offered me seven hundred and fifty dollars and said he was being generous." Seldom swore and kissed Belle's rouged cheek. "He-he-he," he said.

She kissed him back, put her arms around his neck and placed her lips against his ear. "I've known Blair—Mr. Hembrook a long time, honey," she whispered huskily. "But I hate him, *hate* him now. Do you know what he wanted me to do, honey?"

"What?"

"He wanted—he wanted—." She began stroking his hair again. Her voice had a catch in it. "He wanted me to get you drunk and trick you into signing your mine away to him. Can you imagine that? Oh, I *hate* him, honey."

She let him kiss her again. "He-he," said Seldom.

"Honey," she said, patting his cheek. "I want to see you get a break. I like you, honey. Have you been to see Dale Emery?"

"Emery?" said Seldom. He swore. "He'd be like all the rest. They're all the same. Why should I go to see any more of them?"

"Mr. Emery might be different, honey," said Belle.

Seldom tried blinking the whiskey haze away from in front of his eyes. Belle's face was there close to him. Now he could see wrinkles in her forehead, the pouches underneath the eyes, harsh hardness in their glance.

"Do you like me, honey?" asked Belle cooingly.

"Where does Dale Emery come in?" asked Seldom. "I thought you were with Hembrook."

She pursed her lips. "Don't you want to kiss me, honey?"

It was suddenly there in Seldom in a disgusted, repellant way. "How much would Emery give me?" he asked.

"Oh, honey," Belle pouted.

Seldom grabbed her arms in tight, digging fingers. Anger swelled the cords of his neck. "How much?" he almost shouted.

"Honey," she cried, trying to break his grip. Sudden fear filmed her eyes. Her mouth contorted in an ugly, frightened manner.

"All right," she gasped out in a panicked, hissing tone. "Eight hundred dollars."

* * *

MR. HEMBROOK said, "You drive a hard bargain, ah, Seldom. One can't put it over on you, can one? Ha, ha. Good for you, though. I like to see a man drive a shrewd bargain. Ha, ha. Well, here it is. Count it, ah, Seldom. Nine hundred dollars."

Seldom ruffled the bills, shoved them in his pocket. His gaze kept turning toward the window and out to the desert. A faint nostalgia stirred in him.

Mr. Hembrook clapped him on the back. "Yes, indeed, ah, Seldom. You really upped my ante, didn't you? Ha, ha. Hope we can do business again in

the future. Drop in any time. Glad to have you. Ha, ha."

"Well, thanks, Mr. Hembrook," said Seldom, shuffling toward the door. "I'll be going now."

"Ha, ha, ha," said Mr. Hembrook...

* * *

SELDOM couldn't put it into words. The overwhelming disgust, the acrid bitterness, the needling anger rolling inside him. He was of the desert, of its loneliness and meagerness, of its waste and desolation. He was one of its muted voices, moaning through a lonely greasewood or sagebrush, voicing the ageless, wordless cry of the lost.

His shoes kicked up small spurts of sand as he walked along and behind him trailed his two burros. Aimlessness was his direction and dejectedness his mind.

He threw up his head once and let a string of blistering curses spill past his lips but abruptly he quieted; it was too late for recriminations now.

He'd had such beautiful dreams. Back in the Desolations when he'd first uncovered that gold-specked rock, he'd dropped on his knees and thrown back his head and he'd let the wordless, incoherent thanks come laughing crazily out of his throat.

Then it had been no more desert, no more sand, no more loneliness and frustration. He'd build a castle of white marble ringed with cool shade trees. He'd build a pond and fill it with sparkling water and bathe in it every day. He'd—

But that was before he'd learned of the greed and avarice of men. Remembrance of it filled him with a gnawing anger. Hembrook, Morehouse, Emery, Belle; he could not quite understand yet why he had selected Hembrook. Maybe because of Belle selling Hembrook out to Emery. Maybe it was that...

Seldom lifted his head. In the distance the Desolations thrust their high, rugged, purple-shrouded crests toward the burnished sky. A gust of wind swept the desert, flinging sand against his face. The pungent odor of greasewood filled his nostrils.

Was it because of Belle, he asked himself. Was it because Hembrook had seemed the least offensive of them all? Or was it the desert?

He'd known nothing else for forty years. The desert was cruel and heartless, full of hidden wealth and sudden treachery. It held the lure of a beautiful woman, beckoning, enticing. It flung a harsh, ruthless challenge.

But he knew its vagaries, its moods. He'd always felt a kindred loneliness a solemn, mutual understanding. Looking off at the Desolations so forbidding and brooding across the desert haze, he felt an eagerness possess him and an urge to hurry.

For an instant, as the cleanness washed over him, Seldom felt an inner pang: he'd taken Hembrook's money and given him a map showing where his monuments had been placed. But that map hadn't been quite accurate. And now he was on his way to change the territory to fit that map. He wondered how he could have done such a thing...sure, people like Hembrook, Morehouse Emery, Belle did worse than this without thinking about it. But they didn't see things the way Seldom did.

He paused, half started to go back. Then he smiled; his alterations were not very large ones. True, they'd find no gold, no mine where his monuments would lie when they came upon them. But the mine *could* be discovered within a few days with the leads they had; a man who loved the desert, who knew it, who was willing to labor for its secrets could find the gold now —much more easily then Seldom had found it.

He threw back his head and laughed. "Let Hembrook work for it; if he works just half as hard for two, three days, as I've worked for forty years, he'll have his mine." Seldom's steps quickened and the shadow fell from his mind. The recent events were all in the past, blended with so many yesterdays that their exact place was blurred. He was back in the desert again, back amidst the endlessly drifting sand. Mesquite reached out welcoming claws at him; sage showered him with its tangy perfume. A joyful laugh was bubbling up into his throat...home again...

THE END

★ THE CHEATER ★

(Continued From Page 43)

est and mostest wins'," replied Rudy.

"That's a mighty fine motto, I do say," commented Jeff. "But do you know what happens to men who cheats?"

"Nothin', if'n they don't get caught."

"Mighty true," said Jeff, as he dealt out two hands of draw poker, dealer's choice.

"Give me one cahd," said Rudy.

"Ah'll take two," said Jeff.

"Bet you the limit," said Rudy after carefully studying his cards.

"Ah'll call you. What you got?"

Rudy showed his cards, then he smiled. "Wal, seein's you turned yore hand down, Ah reckon Ah wins."

Jeff's eyes narrowed to gimlet-like slots. "You cheated," he said, slowly, coldly. He drew his pistol, cocked it, and leveled it across the table.

"Now, hol' on thar, Jeff," chimed in Ed McDoo. "Put thet gun down. Ah'll decide if'n he cheated or not; Ah'm the jedge."

McDoo turned to Rudy. "Did you cheat, boy? If'n you did, 'fess up, 'cause it'll go mighty poorly with you if'n you did, and don't admit it."

"Wal," said Rudy, "seein' nothin' will happen to me if'n I did, and do admit it—'ceptin' maybe I lose the contest—I 'fess."

Rudy looked across the table at Jeff, then reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out three cards, flung them on the table. "You shore got mighty good eyes, cowboy," he said, "Nobody else in the room saw the way I did it; I bin practisin' thet trick for six months; thought I had it perfect."

Rudy got up from the table and stalked out of the saloon.

JEFF COLLECTED his five-hundred-dollar prize, and rushed home to show the money to Anna and tell her about the game.

"Oh, Jeff," she said, "Ah'm so proud of you. But tell me the trick of how Rudy cheated."

"Wal," began Jeff, "t' tell the truth, I didn't 'zackly see him cheat."

"Wal, then," said Anna, "how'd you know?"

"Wal, it was right simple." Jeff smiled. "You see, he didn't play the hand Ah dealt him!"

THE END

VIRGINIA CITY — THE ROARING CAMP

(Continued From Page 46)

citizens living there—a relic of bygone days. For instance the International Hotel, is said to have been the first building west of the Mississippi River to have an elevator.

The old-timers which stayed on, and who are not dead, still linger on and declare firmly that Virginia City will come back. Who knows? Their dreams may become a reality. With modern methods and science, the Comstock may be restored as a great producer of nobel metals.

Some experts declare that only one-fifth of the Comstock Lode above the 1600 foot level has never been prospected and below that level, not one-tenth. They say that millions of tons of good ore may yet be worked from the croppings of the Lode. There is no doubt that the metal is still there, and let us hope that the new generation of miners will have the nerve to look for it and the skill to find it. And bring back once more to life the Virginia City of yesterday.

★ ★ ★

Jack pictured himself defending this ranch . . .

They called him Big Jack Mulhall, but he didn't feel big; the only big thing about him was the fear inside him!

The Devil Rides The Downgrade

by REX WHITECHURCH

(author of "Frontier Coroner")

FEAR RODE with Big Jack Mullhall, the quaking fear of a man. He felt the sharp pain from the other's blows, and sweat stood out on his broad, scarred face. Two of his front teeth were permanently absent, knocked out by his antagonist of two savage fistic battles—no, not savage, either. Always his fear had made him a helpless victim of the bully.

The morning's red shadows fell and the sun was in his eyes. His pinto labored up a steep long hill and Mullhall brought him to a stop at the peak. The day was hot and the acrid powder dust was thick. Jack Mullhall thought of this road as a fugitive trail over which he would never ride back. Hours before he had barely escaped a posse headed by the sheriff of the adjoining county. Somewhere ahead lay safety if he could reach it; he mopped sweat and groaned and his big shoulders sagged heavily. He kept on riding his little nag carrying him through the lonesome shimmer of heat and the stillness of the boundless prairie.

There was a small, flat-roofed cabin less than fifty feet from the road. It had a battered stovepipe sticking out of one end of it. Jack Mullhall saw a tiny corral and aman leaning over a red fire grasping a branding iron. A girl in the dusty levis was tugging at an obstinate calf and trying to coax it to her.

The cowboy grinned and pushed his flat crowned hat to the back of his head. He was in a country of gunny-sack spreads, of four-bit ranchers who had been driven out of the good grazing in the valey.

Jack reined in and the pinto stood motionless, as indifferent as a statuette. The calf broke away and the girl yelled. Big Jack Mullhall dove fast, leaning down and grasping at the trailing rope. He hooked it quickly around the pommel of his worn saddle and the pinto, coming abruptly to life, whirled and braced himself. The calf, as frisky as ever, jolted to a stop, the rope stretched taut. Then Jack urged the little horse forward, dragging the calf behindf, an amazed look on its face. A moment later he was down beside the man.

The man finished his work and the two of them rose together. The farmer had reddish silver hair and mopped it with a blue bandanna. Their eyes met. Big Jack Mullhall's mild blue eyes were full of laughter; he was good-natured, 6 years old, and right now untroubled by the bitterness of his shady past, the scars and missing teeth.

"Reckon you need a man to help you," he said. He cast a mischievous glance at the girl. Even the washed blue levis and faded loose hickory shirt could not conceal the fact that this slim person was a girl. A silken roll of red-brown hair tumbled from under her battered wool ha; and her eyes were as blue as Jack Mullhall's. The cowboy languidly turned toward his pinto.

"I appreciate this very much," the girl said. "I'm not used to it, as I guess you could tell." She gave a little laugh at her own embarrassment, and something in the sound was reminiscent of a Spanish dancer's castanets.

The ear cutting and branding having been successfully completed the old man dropped the iron beside the fire, looked at Jack Mullhill and smiled his approbation. What he saw was a tall, brown-haired cowpolk in a double-breasted blue shirt, worn levis, old boots and a broken rowel on his right spur. His chin was squared; he had broad cheek bones and a nose that was quite flat at the nostrils, a deep sun tan and large, capable looking hands. His missing teeth and the scars didn't detract from his attractiveness but seemed to add to it. On his right hip, thonged down was a Colt, its varnished handle gleamed in the firelight.

"The best way to handle a calf like that one," he said, "is to loop your rope around the animal's two front feet and snub th' rope tight to a post. He'll hold tha tway."

The girl regarded him with deep interest in her eyes. There was a freshness about her; she suggested clean winds coming over lush hayfields. "Yes I know," she conceded. "But Dad always gets 'em by the

head, the way you describe is the best. It saves the hard work of having to wrestle with the critter."

JACK MULLHALL thought it would be a tough job for a girl to throw a calf—a big one anyhow. He turned and looked out over the small herd. The calf crop wasn't bad, with big and active critters, some of them far too heavy for a girl to handle. And now that he was facing him, Big Jack saw how fragile and pale the old man was. His calloused hands were shaky, too, and he didn't seem too steady on his thin, bow legs.

They built new smokes and the girl leant against the corral fence, still with her eyes resting sharply on Jack Mullhall's rugged figure. "I reckon we might make a place for an extra hand," she said suddenly. If he's not going any place in particular, Dad he could help you while I teach my school."

Jack Mullhall hesitated, one hand on the pommel of his ancient saddle. He had meant to put more miles between himself and Jim Blue's outfit. If Blue ever found out where he was! His eyes went slowly to the girl's. They met again, they lingered.

"You'd be a big help to us, Mister." Her voice was low, troubled. For the first time the cowboy observed her worried state. This puzzled him, knocked down the barricade he'd tried to erect. Against his better judgment he nodded assent.

"Don't have nothin' planned," he said. "I was sort-of lookin' for a job. I'm not in any hurry, and I reckon I can stay on here and help you with them calves. That is, if you really want me to."

He removed his war bag from his pinto and packed it across the yard to the house, the girl leading the way. All through the sweltering day, in loops of dust and sweat he put his rope over the hind legs of calves and pulled them to the branding corral. Perhaps it was the encouragement of the girl's interested eyes, the way she openly admired him—but he'd never done better roping in his life.

About five o'clock the girl left them and went to the house to prepare supper.

It had been a pleasant day, although a hot one. Big Jack Mullhall's past seemed far off. Really it seemed like something he had read in a book. The face that there was a price on his head—seven hundred dollars dead or alive—might've been a figment of his imagination.

"YOUR DAUGHTER teaches school?" Mullhall managed to ask several questions during the course of the afternoon, without appearing too nosey. "Her name's Iva. Your name's Twain, huh? Can't say I ever heard the name before. Did you say you've had some trouble with the cattle barons over the ridge? It's bad, but I don't believe I would let 'em run me out.

Yes, of course he understood. It was hard to find men you could depend on. Sure, it was a lucky thing Iva had a job. She could save her money and when she got enough, they could move out of the wild grass country. Then Jack Mullhall learned about the old mans brother. The latter ran the Double O in Cottonwood County, about fifty miles south.

Big Jack choked up. It was the only splotch on the otherwise perfect afternoon. The Double O was the reason Jack Mullhall was now a fugitive with seven hundred dollars on his head. He was accused of being a member of Jim Blue's cattle rustling gang. Blue had framed him.

But Big Jack got more cheerful toward nightfall. A fine evening was enjoyed by all in the clean little cabin as the moon climbed the lattice work of the stars. The cowboy walked with Iva Twain in the cool of the front yard; she had attended an eastern college. Big Jack was the only son of a celebrated peace officer of Hayes. He had no living kinfolks that,he knew of. He had ramrodded for several spreads; he'd been a fence rider for a millionaire cattle baron just before he'd come north.

"My Uncle Jim is a millionaire cattle baron," Iva said innocently. "He owns the Double O in the next county. He wants me to come and live

with him. Dad says when I have saved enough money teaching to be independent, we'll go and accept Uncle Jim's invitation. Although we're only about fitfty miles apart, Dad hasn't seen Uncle Jim for ten years."

Jack found his interest in the girl augmented by her sweetness of manner. She didn't try to conceal her curiosity anbout him. He led her back from the spring to the cabin, holding her hand. He felt that a new man had been born.

THEN THE next morning, Twain called him and showed him something that left him scared.

"I didn't hear anything in the night," the old man said. "But these fresh tracks speak for themselves. Four hosses, all recently shod. Them shoes ain't th' work of our local blacksmith who shoes all th' nags around here. They're foreign shoes, big and heavy, which leave a definite print. You ever seen anything like 'em before?"

Jack Mullhall looked and stiffened. It was evident to him that Jim Blue had paid this ranch a visit in the night. Jim Blue carried his own blacksmith. A thickheaded giant of a man he'd left his mark as plainly stamped there as if he'd written his name in the dust. Horse shoeing was his hobby. Never had Big Jack seen such shoes as Blue used on his string of Morgans. "I reckon I'm just a little original," Blue had said; and Big Jack thought, "and your originality will hang you, if I'm not mistaken."

But why had the rustler come here to this little spread? Cold and clear-headed, Big Jack weighed the situation. No doubt the rustler was still in this neighborhood, and had tracked him down. Mullhall sensed danger and felt it clawing at him; he tried to shake it off. Fear ate at his heart. The one man in the world he was afraid of had once again become a dire threat.

They worked on till midmorning. Despite the heat the big waddy felt chilled. When the sweat leaked out on his face it was cold sweat. It was bad enough to be wanted by the law, but to have a killer like Jim Blue on his trail was an ordeal that took a toll he couldn't afford to pay.

Iva called from the housde and rang a little bell such as schoolma'am used to end recess. Big Jack washed at a wooden bench outside the cabin door. He had made up his mind to help Twain that afternoon. And when night came it found him undecided.

The meal was delicious. The small kitchen shone from many a scrubbing and the curtains at the windows were impeccable. The cabin was bigger than it had seemed at a distance. It had four rooms, two bed chambers, a kitchen and a parlor. The food was better than he'd ever found in any chuck wagon spread. Over her levis Iva wore a spotless white apron and her reddish hair was coiled smoothly around her head.

Mullhall ate far more than he usually did, and the big cowboy was comforted by the atmosphere which was that of home and friends. He forgot all about the dangers that enmeshed him. Death was something you just simply didn't think about in the Twain home. As small as it was, to Big Jac Mullhall it was a castle. He wished he could stay here forever.

Twain pushed back his plate and build a smoke. "Been somebody prowlin' around here, Iva," he contended quietly.

For a moment Mullhall watched her face. She had her blue eyes lowered to her plate. She was silent. But the rich color was gradually slipping out of her cheeks. Suddenly she got up and, without a word, moved swiftly to the open door.

OLD MAN Twain dragged in a puff of smoke and exhaled lazily, his eyes on the slim, boyish figure in the open door. She turned, looked at her aged parent, then at the gigantic cowboy.

"I get it now," she said. "When I went down to the spring after water before you men got up, four riders were resting their Morgans. The horses were all alike. One man who impressed me more than his companions wore a red silk shirt and pearl

handled guns. He's a giant. A sandy beard covers his face. His eyes are ice-blue. But he tipped his hat and thanked me for the water. They finally rode away, a covered wagon clattering behind them. Four horses were hitched to the wagon, Morgans, also."

She paused, bit her red lips. "They probably came in here for water. It surely doesn't amount to enough to worry about."

At three o'clock they knocked off for a rest. Mullhall saw Iva scanning the horseshoe imprints. Then he saw her going toward his pinto and a cold sweat broke out on his face. She bent down and inspected the little nag's tracks in the hard ground. When she passed him enroute to the house she didn't speak. Her head was inclined and she seemed to be in deep thought.

The branding was over. He saddled his pinto and rode off. Iva stood in *the* door and waved at him. The sight made him feel good and his recently formed resolution was strengthened twofold. What he had seen in her eyes that morning at the table when he'd surprised her looking at him, couldn't be mistaken for anything but love.

Again and again it came to Big Jack Mullhall that he'd never had anything to work for, not until now. It was strange what love and a keen desire for a home could do to a man who'd never had them.

The feeling stayed with him. All he wanted now was a wife and a little place just like the house he was leaving. It didn't matter so much about the house if he got the girl. All those things would come later. He turned his pinto around and rode back to the cabin. He had made up his mind to tell Iva Twain how he felt about her.

He heard voices through the open window. One of those voices he recognized and fear clutched his throat. Blue! It was the renegade's deep voice.

"Jack Mullhall's a rustler and you'd better get shut of him, if he comes back. I came here to settle a personal *score* with the fugitive. He's a mean hombre and ain't fit to be free. The sheriff of Cottonwood County will be here any minute after him."

With sudden, overwhelming fear, Big Jack roweled his pinto. He was carried swiftly beyond earshot and even sight of the house. He rode like he was mad; the only thing governing him was his fear. He was scared half to death. He was blind and helpless against the invasion of these quaking terrors that made mince meat of his nerves. He had decided to give himself up to the law, but now he knew he couldn't. He would get away from here—he would get away as far as possible. It was hours, it seemed to him, before he stopped his little horse and got cool again.

* * *

BIG JACK Mullhall had made another decision. Jim Blue wanted his hide. The big rustler hated him and, because he had escaped in the night knowing Blue had planned to drygulch him, Mullhall had left the renegade blazing mad. There was one thing about it; as strange as Jim Blue was he couldnt control his hate for Jack Mullhall and in this weakness lay a chance for the big cowboy to come out even or a little better should their trails cross again.

"If I best him," Big Jack said as he topped a gentle ridge, "the others won't bother me. They're afraid of him. They'll stand by and see me kill him, if I can. Then they'll ride away and leave me alone. I can give myself up to the sheriff and stand trial. The chances are I'll be sent to prison, but when I get out Iva will—well, she might be waiting—"

But he knew he was scared of Jim Blue. Fine talk like this didn't banish his fear. Often before he'd thought he could fight it out with the rustler but had given up the first licks he got and had run away.

At dusk he paused to water his horse at the spring, dismounted and hunkered down with his back to a cottonwood. He sat there and smoked a cigarette and thought how big the world was in comparison. He was soon in his saddle again, and once more riding around in circles trying to make himself brave enough to find Jim Blue. He saw that little house and

the girl in it which were like toys on a Christmas counter, to be had if one could pay the price.

He passed the little schoolhouse where Iva taught; it was white and had a bell tower and there was a flagpole in the front yard and some playground equipment, for instance a rope swing in a cottonwood. The trees cast wispy shadows around the building. He had come a great distance from the Twain cabin because he'd been ridin' in a circle.

When he urged his pinto across the narrow wooden bridge that led in among the trees and rode across the schoolyard he saw where many little feet had scuffed the grass away. And not far beyond the rope swing a crimson ground fire burned against the coffee-tinted gloom. Just as he reined in, a voice low and gruff, challenged him.

"Who you lookin' for, Jack—me?" A giant of a man heaved himself forward, leaving the shadows behind him and pushing a tree limb out of his face. He stood with his hands on his hips now, his red silk shirt open down the front and wet with sweat; his shoulders seemed a mile wide to the rider on the little pinto.

"Mebbe you're lookin' for me," Mullhall said, staring down from his horse. "I figgered I'd save you the trouble of the hunt."

The rustler struck his chest with a big fist. "You're crazy, Mullhall; I'll tear you apart. I've done it so many times it has grown to be a pleasure. I c'n eat and sleep better afer I've hammered your head till it looks like a busted pumpkin. Get down offen your nag and come up to the fire. We might jist as well be sociable till it's time to fight.

BIG JACK Mullhall felt his confidence shaken, and sweat gathered in globules on his face. Before this rocklike bully he mentally trembled and in his own imagination he grew small and unimportant. His sickness increased as he saw his antagonist in this unusual conflict slowly turn and walk off laughing. They were practically of the same height, with the weight a little in Jim Blue's favor.

The bull ykept walking toward the fire. Stealth governed Jack Mullhall's movement toward his gun; caution, however, intercepted his hand before he reached the hickory butt. He had conjured up another picture of Iva and the miniature house in the vale. Something hardened in his jaw and he swallowed hard. His throat was dry because emotion was sledging him with bestial force. He let the reins drop over the pinto's head. With short resolute steps he clomped over the rose glow in the trees. He had never had anything to fight for until now...

He was Big Jack Mullhall's chance to settle things with Jim Blue, the chance to mae a new life and bury his past. He owed the rustler a beating; in fact, the way he figured he owed the bully a killing. That little job of framing him afer he had declined to help Blue steal cattle from the Double O had become a neat one. Blue had dropped back on their old acquainttance when they were kids in school and in a covered wagon train from Ohio, thinking to tempt Mullhall with his cunning talk of sudden riches. "We c'n become the biggest men in the west," Jim Blue had said. "Why toil like you're working now for forty a month?"

But the bully had not been a good friend when they were growing until he was seventeen and then he thought he'd never stop. Blue had given him more than one severe beating. Fifty pounds heavier and fifty times more brutal in his natural instincts, the bully had twice almost killed him. Yet he hadn't said anything to his parents,had doctored his wounds in the shelter of his little bedroom in the house where he'd lived in Hayes. Blue's father was a saloon keeper and Mullhall's father had been one of the most respected town marshals the town of Hayes had ever seen.

Finally the boys were parted because of their inability to get along. Blue had worked for nearby big spreads and had become a cowboy, occasionally working on a farm. He turned out to be a better rider than his old rival and Blue knew it. However they had never clashed again with their fists until that day near

the Double O when Blue had knocked him down and battered him until he'd turned and run away. Shortly after that Blue had caught up with him in a saloon, and after being hit hard three or four times Jack had taken to his heel. Although humiliated by the laughter behind him he hadn't gone back to renew the hostilities.

In Big Jack's mind were memories he couldn't banish. He'd been brooding on those cruel lacings Blue had given him. His fear of the other man had grown in magnitude in Mullhall's heart and brain. He couldn't explain the fear. He only knew that when in the rustler's presence he felt inferior and meek and without courage. He had caught himself trembling when the renegade, provoked by Big Jack's silence whenever they were together, had walked toward him with cocked fists.

HUNKERED down beside the fire Jack saw four other riders in the flickering red shadows. He found a new face, one he had never seen before. It was a round, dark mask, with slitted steel-colored eyes, a tough, thin mouth. He was weighing Jack Mullhall in cool insolence.

Blue confronted Mullhall across the low fire and studied him with merciless gaze. "So you've got yourself a new job... "He meditated this a moment and then grinned at his companions. "You pulled out on me in the night. Reckon you heard I had a little difference to settle with you for running out on that Double O job. I gave you a fine opportunity, but I allow you'd rather stay poor all your life. I'll bet you ain't got fifty cents in your pocket right now. But— Well, me and the boys are plannin' on doin' a little fancy rustlin'. What's th' brand over there where you're th' new ramrod? We gotta work cause the sheriff's on our trail."

Big Jack felt disaster slugging through him and his throat got dry as a chip of wood. He tasted the clammy sweat that ran into the corners of his mouth. His flaring hot blood seemed to be bustling his arteries. The palms of his big hands were covered with sweat.

Shutting his eyes against the sharp pain of worry, the cowboy gained his feet. His legs shook under him. He couldn't find his voice.

Finally with great difficulty he said, "You keep your men out of this and we'll see who's doin' th' bossin' around here. Make it a clean fair fight and I'll take you on, Mister."

The bully laughed harshly and lurched to his feet. They were two big men looking at each other with iron faces set in steel lines. Jim Blue was both surprised and angered. Something he'd never expected to happen had taken place there before his eyes. The way he looked at Big Jack, with slow contempt staining and twisting his features increased the cowboy's fear of the rustler. It was too late to turn back now, though; and he suddenly remembered that for the first time in his life he had something to fight for. He saw Iva standing in the door of the little cabin and ringing that silver bell.

Jim Blue eagerly unfastened his shell belt and it dropped heavily to the ground. Mullhall saw the guns with the pink light glinting off the pearl handles. He unlocked his own cartridge belt and it thumped down too.

"Th' best man takes charge and th' other does what he tells him; if you whip me we'll go away and never bother you no more."

What better reward could a man ask for than that? Big Jack Mullhall stood shakily on his lean muscular legs and scanned the glowering masks in the cerese screen of the fire. He thought he read approval and hope in those narrowed eyes and found encouragement.

Jim Blue was peeling off his red shirt and now he fondly draped it over the pommel of his saddle on the patient little pinto.

They were about the same size and build except that Blue was perhaps twenty pounds heavier. Mullhall was almost as wide through the shoulders but was as thick through the chest and his arms were just as long. Blue had bigger, heavier legs. Mullhall

made up for this in the flatness of his stomach where Blue was a trifle flabby. They walked off to a clear place and the four riders got up and came forward out of the flame-red screen. The firelight pirouetted through the gathering dusk.

THEY CAME together with an explosive force, Blue plunging head-foremost at Mullhall. The jarring contact sent them reeling apart, and Big Jack staggered and recovered his balance and hurled himself at his antagonist with both fists working.

The meaty connection of flesh and bone was a strange sensation that drove Jack Mullhall into a cold urge to feel it again. Blue landed asolid fist to his jaw and Mullhall rolled away and hit the ground. On hisback he rocked with his heels in theair.

For twenty years this fight had been brewing; and now that it had come the explosion of pent up wrath was unique in its savage release. For the first time after being floored by Blue, Mullhall bounded up, full of youth and stamina, trying to clear his head by shaking it. Always before when Blue had knocked him down he had quit. The four men watching this barbaric exhibition were like wolves kept at bay with firebrands thrown at them. He was still a little drunk as he settled down to face Blue again.

Many times before Mullhall had felt the jar and tear of Blue's sledge-like punches. The blows that smacked into him, didn't faze him; and he slugged with power, crashing his knuckles into Blue's bobbing, weaving head, and was thrilled by the glistening blood he saw around Blue's mouth and nose. it marked the first time he'd ever drawn blood on his old enemy. His rawhide muscles responded perfectly in coordination with his brain.

His fear of running away at the first hard lick was banished by the thrill he got by banging his knuckles in Blue's face. He hit at every part of the renegade that exposed itself. Pounding and slashing he slithered in close, the rain of blows of his face and chest not stopping him. But Blue's elbow cut across his chin and Big Jack felt something give way in his head.

The earth trembled under the impact of those colliding giants.

Sledging at the shifting target and being slugged viciously in return, Mullhall drove in. The bully gave ground, dancing out of range. Big Jack Mullhall followed him, aware that now the whole front of his chest was wet with blood. He was sure his nose had been broken, bells clanged in his ears and he heard shouts from the throats of men tense with excitement, or was it fear?

"Th' sheriff's comin'! Th' sheriff—" There was a sudden exchange of gunfire, but neither fighter paused in his efforts to subdue the other. Mullhall's breath whistled through his swelling lips, tore from his heart, it seemed. They clenched and both went down, tearing the earth away in clods, their huge bodies twisting and heaving as they continued their merciless struggle. The guns were well within reach, and Big Jack saw Blue's hand start slowly toward the belt near his right hand. Then Mullhall rolled hard against him and they rolled over and over.

The other, greater danger was far from their thoughts as they tried in those last seconds to kill each other.

JIM BLUE suddenly lifted himself and Jack found himself being hurled backward. Crawling with slow stealth, the renegade headed for his guns and Blue did likewise, It was all he could do to move. but his encouragement carried him on. The clods hurt his hands and knees, yet he kept moving toward his own gun belt which he could see through his half-shut eyes, the swelling gradually blinding him. He had whipped his man, but the other was going to kill him if he beat Mullhall to the weapons in the gleam of the campfire.

Inch by inch, thinking he'd give out any second now, Jack neared the firearms with which he would defend himself against the cowardice of his antagonist. Once he flattened out and didn't think he could move another

ince, but determination raised his mighty shoulders and he moved on again. Finally it ended when Blue fell on his face, his right hand within an inch of his guns.

It sang through Jack's head that he was hurt plenty but that his rival was in far worse shape and completely out. He smelled of sweat and blood and blood rivered down his hairy chest. It was dark here beyond the rose gleam of fire in the trees, but Jack Mullhall knew that he was surrounded by booted and spurred men and they were speaking to him. He lifted his eyes slowly and through the slit in his left eye—the other was swollen shut—he saw a badge shimmer in the red haze.

"Get up, Mullhall," a voice said. "You've given us a lot of trouble but you won't give us much more. Get up so I can lock these cuffs on you—"

Steel bracelets dangled from the sheriff's big fist as he bent over to make Jack hear him.

Cold misery twisted all the hope and victory out of his heart.

After winning his fight against Blue he now faced crushing defeat at the hands of the law. He just simply dropped his face against outstretched arms and went peacefully to sleep.

* * *

When the big cowboy moved his arms a sharp pain went up them and stung in his shoulders. He spread his hands apart and knew they were free and he wondered at this, finding great satisfaction in the fact that he wasn't handcuffed. But no doubt his wrists were so badly swollen they couldn't be made to fit. He had some gloomy thoughts before a gentle voice said:

"You're all right, Jack." It was her voice—Iva was speaking to him. It was such a sweet and soft and musical sound that tears almost came to Big Jack's throbbing eye. "The Sheriff wanted you, too, but there was a cattleman's detective in the rustler's band, and he cleared you. He was disguised as a bandit and he got the truth from the rustlers. He's a big insolent looking man and always looks mad, but he's nice as pie, Jack. We can go home now, so let's get moving pronto."

Home! Big Jack Mullhall rubbed his hands over his bruised face. It would be a long time before he could see right well, but when he could, her piquant face would be there for him to look at. Reward enough for any man—

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FAMOUS WESTERN

Handcart Pioneers

by The Lawdog

TRUE FACT FEATURE

THE MEN who crossed the lands of Young America to build up homes for themselves in the West had to be people of courage. My great grandfather used to tell me, when I was a boy, of the journey he took with his wife and two young children in an ox-drawn covered wagon. Not once did he have trouble with the Indians. His hardships were concerned mainly with the changes in weather, crossing streams, keeping stock together, repairing the wagon, providing food and water, and keeping the two youngsters out of trouble.

Once when I said to him, "It must have been real tough crossing the plains in an ox-drawn wagon." a smile appeared over his wrinkled face. "It was much tougher for the pioneers who used handcarts," was his comment. Pioneers using handcarts? It seemed fantastic but it actually took place.

The Mormons were going West by the thousands. At the same time an Emigration Fund was being raised to help converts from abroad come to America and start the westward journey. Ships were charted to bring people across the Atlantic. The cost of using ox-drawn wagons was more than the slender funds available could provide for, taking into consideration the large number of people who wanted to make the journey Westwards. Bringham Young hit upon a novel but practical idea. In a letter dated September, 1855 he made his suggestion to Franklin D. Richards who was in charge of the European Missions.

In the letter he said, *We cannot afford to purchase wagons and teams as in times past...I am consequently thrown back upon my old plan to make handcarts and let the emigration foot it... The carts can be made without iron, with wheels, hooped, made strong and light, and one—or if the family be large—two of them will bring all they will need upon the plains.*

THE PEOPLE were organized into companies and the handcarts were built. Some of these companies made the trip without too much trouble besetting them. Unfortunately, unseasoned timber was used in making some of these carts. As a result the wheels became wobbly. In other cases the axles wore through and the carts had to be tied together with rawhide. Food consumption was great because of the hearty appetites resulting from the long daily walk. Choice bits of family furniture and heirlooms had to be left behind because of limited space in the handcarts.

One group ran into stark tragedy as the food supply ran low and the winter snows piled up. When help reached this particular company, about one-sixth had died from starvation and coldness. Others reached their cherished goal in Utah. Records show that among the first companies to take the trip, they were able to travel the 1400 miles from Iowa City to Salt Lake City in nine weeks. Unless you have ever handled an ox-drawn wagon, this next fact doesn't seem possible. There were days when these hardy pioneers actually doubled the distance travelled by an ox-drawn wagon!

Any time you hear folks telling you that people in this country are "soft" just think about these handcart pioneers.

Two-Ton can't quite outrun birdshot . . .

The Cat's Trophy

by ARCHIE JOSCELYN

(Author of "Ma Jackson and The Full House")

Ordinarily, I'd reach for my gun when Two-Ton Tompkins come forth with a sure-fire idea for makin' money. But I was so gol-danged sick of workin' . . .

TWO-TON (that's my dumb partner) straightens his back with a sound like a squeaky wagon brake takin' hold. Then he throws down the pick-axe he's been swingin', and dusts his hands together in a gesture of supreme disgust. I

takes advantage of the opportunity to lean on my shovel.

"Toothpicks," Two-Ton pronounces portentous, wipin' a dirty sleeve across the sweat of his face. "You and me are a couple of fat-heads!"

That sounds kinda personal, but I ain't in no mood to dispute him.

"Think of us, workin' like the common hoy-polly," he goes on, "Grubbin' for gold! Diggin' like earthworms! And what do they get? The bird! And what are we gettin' out of it? Blisters and a crick in the back!"

"You got an idea?" I asks, not too hopeful. Usual when Two-Ton gets a notion, it's sure to lead to trouble. But after workin' that claim for a couple of weeks, and not even a sign of color, I'm desperate enough for most anything.

"I sure has," Two-Ton retorts. "One that's going to pay us big, without no more of this sort of grubbin' like a mole." He waves his hand disdainful. "I ask you, where is the big money? Where was the big gold strike made?"

"That's easy," I groans. "Where we wasn't. Off'n at Mountain Bar."

"Exactly," Two-Ton nods. "At Mountain Bar, a mere ninety miles from here. And we allowed ourselves to be distracted and persuaded to head for a rumored strike hereabouts instead. From all reports, they have two things at Mountain Bar—a surfeit of both, apparently. One of them is gold—and why shouldn't we help with the spending of it? The other one—I ask you, what is the other?"

"Whiskey?" suggests, hopeful.

"Rats!" Two-Ton snaps, and for a minute I think he's bein' dispargin' of my suggestion. "A plague of rats! Don't you remember the reports we've been receiving? How the rats are so thick in that town that they're driving the people crazy? Well, suh, there is the land of opportunity! Have you ever heard of the Pied Piper of Hamburger?"

"Was he pie-eyed, or somethin'?" I asks.

"Can't you get your mind off likker?" Two-Ton snorts. "This pie-eyed pickle—I mean the Piped Pie—anyway, he cleaned out the rats in that town. That's what we're going to do in Mountain Bar."

"Two-Ton," I says, stern. "The bar part sounds all right to that town. But there's a limit to these fool notions you keep getting. I'm a respectable cattle-rustler by perfession, but you're always leadin' me astray. I've helped you round up hens, and got a rottenaig deal out of it; we've wrasseled with goats; I've even been in on a mule deal by the dark of the ,oon. Furthermore, I come here with you, stampedin' to dig gold, when you got the bright idea that we was cut out for prospectors. But there's a plumb limit, I repeat. I'll rustle dogies, and take the hee-haw from donkeys. But I draw the line at rats. As a old Dutchman I used to know would say, rats mit you."

Two-ton, just like usual, ain't impressed. I doubt if he's even been listenin'.

"It's a cinch," he says. "We'll go down to Ponca City and get us a wagon load of cats! We got the wagon and team to start with. Cats to catch rats! Then we'll take our cats to camp and sell them for a big price! They'll be worth their weight in gold! Fverybody'll be anxious to buy! We can't miss, Toothpicks."

"Cats," I repeat, weakenin'. "Well, that does put a diff'rent set uh whiskers on it—"

"Got get our horses and hook them to the wagon," Two-Ton instructs. "I'll bust camp. We're headin' for town! Cats, here we come! Rats, the cats are on the way!"

* * *

COURSE, I should a known better, thinkin' it over, but like I say, I was ready to jump at anything to get away from that shovel I'd been wieldin'. We bust camp in almost nothin' flat, and along the next day we encounter a white-whiskered old

gent with a burro and a couple cats. Two-Ton's eyes lights up at sight of them felines like he's seein' gold.

"Cats!" he whispers. "Partner, how come you to be travelin' with cats?"

The old timer strokes the back of the yeller one, while the striped cat jumps on top of the pack on the burro.

"Cats is comp'ny," he pronounces. "I've had Jamaica Ginger and Peppermint Sticks for quite a spell. They're smart cats, too."

They look it," Two-Ton agrees. "Wouldn't want to sell 'em, would you?"

The old timer allows he wouldn't. But Two-Ton's got that look in his eye, and the upshot of it is, after a lot of arguin', we acquire them cats for the title of our deserted claim. The way it looks to me, everybody gets stung on that deal, but Two-Ton, as he sets pettin' them cats, is happy as if he ain't locoed.

"We made a good beginnin'," he declares. "Now on to town to get some more."

It's late afternoon of the followin' day when he reaches Ponca City, and camps on the outskirts o' town near a pile of lumber we finds c'nvenient Looks like somebody mebby had buildin' ideas but so does Two-Ton.

"You take a gunny sack and start roundin' up cats," he instructs me as soon as it starts to get dark. "I'll use big crate to keep 'em in."

He's handy at that sort of a job, so I sashays off lookin' for pussies. By that time, I'm beginnin' to share his enthoosiasm. There's an increasin' flood of reports filterin' out from that gold camp, how the rats are makin' life miserable for all and sun dried, 'spite of everything they can do. Seems like we'll be reeceived as heroes when we arrive with a load of rat catchers.

The thing is, as I discovers early, that catchin' cats ain't all it's scratched up to be. I find a couple toms callin' each other names on a back fence, and tries sneakin' up on 'em. The net reesult is that somebody flangs a boot at the cats and ketches me in the stummick with it, whereat the cats merely reepairs to a tree and go on recitin' each other's hist'ry' in uncomplimentary terms.

Gettin' my breath back, I sneaks around and gets set on by a dawg, which up to then ain't had no int'rest in cats. Later I falls in a ditch in the dark, but fin'ly, by dint of perservin', I get hold of one of them perambulatin' cats, a tail-hold. He yowls and kicks as I'm gittin' him sacked, and makes such a ruckus that a night-prowlin' policeman stops me to ask about it.

"I'm takin' this cat down to the creek to drown him," I explains. "We got too many cats as it is."

"That goes for the whole town," the cop agrees hearty. "I sure wish somebody'd drown all of them!"

RESISTIN' the impulse to inform him that we aim to make a thinnin' in the feline population, I returns with my prize. Two-Ton declar's he's expected me to have twenty by that time, so, havin' finished the pen, he accompanies me.

"I'll go show you how it's done," he deeclaims lofty. "There ain't nothin' to it if you knows how."

He sees a pussy and calls, "Kitty, kitty," meanwhile approachin' it in a manner which evidently reeminds the cat of when it creeps up on a mouse. Anyway, it lets out a yowl, but just too late. Two-Ton's grabbed it.

Before he can chuck it in the sack, a kid, that we ain't suspicioned was awake, lets out a yowl to rival the cat's.

"Pa!" he screams. "Somebody's stealin' my cat!"

It's amazin' how fast them folks can move thereabouts. Two-Ton, he moves fast too, but not quite fast enough to outrun a charge of birdshot. Three or four of them pellets peneteates the skin and accelerates his speed so that he passes me, and I'd had a half block the lead. But he keeps the cat.

"So that's the way you do it," I

says, sour. "Nothin' to it, if you knows how."

Next we has a run-in with a lady wieldin' a broom-stick, claimin' we're maltreatin' her pet. Since that cat's scratchin' me, it looks the other way around. Though I guess it's Two-Ton's hat that suffers most, while his head has a bump on it the size of an aig.

But one way and another, learnin' by experience, usin' enticements such as fish heads, a bottle of milk we finds on a doorstep, and so on, we gradually rounds up our cats. Near mornin' we moves the wagon to another end of town, and by the next night we has a full crate of cats. Near a hundred in all.

"We'll get easy ten dollars apiece, or a thousand dollars for this load," Two-Ton declaims, lookin' in at the squallin' bunch of 'em proud as a new papa. "I tell you, we ain't never found no easier money than this, Toothpicks."

"That's a matter of opinion," I retorts, plasterin' lard on some of the scratches I've took. "And we ain't sold them yet. I sure reckon we'll earn all we gets."

Two-Ton's happy, though. He likes cats, and seems like they like him. I've traveled in some strange comp'ny before, but a wagon load of pussies is full of surprises. On a dug road our wagon near tips over, and the crate slides out and down a bank for twenty feet. There's a lot of yowlin', but fortunately it don't bust, or we'd have populated the wilderness with cats.

* * *

THE AFTERNOON of the fourth day we arrives at Mountain Bar. Word of our comin' and the cargo we carries spreads fast, for the cats are gettin' plenty tired of bein' cooped up, and they looks longin' as they perceives a rat scamperin' across the street in broad daylight. The way they surges against the side of that crate near tips the wagon over.

Folks comes crowdin' like the circus has come to town. And when them prospectors sees what we've got, they're just as enthoosiastic as kids at a show, too. I begins to think this is going to be a good notion, after all. The time to cash in would have been right then an' there. Everybody is willin' to take the cats and pay good dust or nuggets for them.

But Two-Ton won't have it that way. He wants to do things real impressive, figgerin' we can charge more. He holds up a hand, resemblin' a ham.

"What we're aimin' to do is deemonstrate to you folks just how good rat catchers these cats are," he deeclaims. "Also the other advantages to be deerived from havin' a cat in yore cabin. Not only will they clean the rats out of this town, but they'll solve a lot of housekeepin' problems. Think of returnin' home in the evenin', tired an' weary after a hard days work—to a real home!" He looks around to where everybody's eyin' him expectant.

"The way it is now, you come home to a cold cabin, all alone. But with a cat waitin' for you, purrin' and rubbin' ag in yore legs—the patter of little feet—"

"I got rats in my shack now," one miner growls.

"But it seems to me I don't perceive no ladies in this camp," Two-Ton suggests, makin' a fresh start.

"No more you don't," one feller agrees. "This is a new camp, and we has our problems. But that ain't one of 'em. It's strictly a bachelor outfit, and you can lay to that."

"As I was sayin'," Two-Ton agrees, bowin' as gracious as his middle will allow him to bend. "There bein' no ladies, as I say, you have certain housekeepin' problems. Such as dishes. My experience," he adds. "Is that dishes has to be washed, say once a week or so, whether you like it or not."

"That's plumb c'rrect, pard," another man corroborates. "It shore puts a damper on the joy of livin'."

"These pussies will help to solve that problem," Two-Ton declares. "You 'keep a cat around the house, and not only do they rid the preemises of rats, but once you've et, pussy jumps on the table and polishes up the left-overs, includin' yore plate. You'll

find it as good a job, after every meal, as heart could wish or the most fastid'us epicure deemand. Dish washin' will be a thing of the past!'

There's a moment of silence. I can see they're touched. Then they bust out in hearty approval. Again they want to pick out their cats and pay their money, but Two-Ton ain't ready yet.

"First we want to deemonstrate what our cats can do," he insists. "We'll let a couple out, to show their ability. Only two. But any two. After that, you'll know that you're gettin' real prizes."

I AIN'T SO sold on that notion, but Two-Ton's as stubborn as any other jackass can be, so we lets a couple of cats loose. One of 'em is Jamaica Ginger, who sticks his tail in the air and stalks off as important as if he was copyin' Two-Ton hisse'f. Pretty soon he vanishes from our sight, ignorin' a rat passin' nearby like it was plumb beneath his notice. Then he vanishes from our sight, and I'm thinkin' we won't see him again.

"He'll be back, b'arin' a trophy which will be fittin' to the occasion," Two-Ton asshores us all, plenty confident. "That's my special partic'lar pet, that Jamaica Ginger cat is. He's got genius."

The other cat is a speckled feline that I had high hopes of. He starts prowlin' like he's hungry for rat. Then a big cat pops up in front of him, twitchin' his whiskers, and the cat turns. The rat starts for him, and the cat busts into a run, headin' back for Two-Ton's legs, tail between his legs, and the rat close behind. He comes on to within two-three jumps, then stops, eyin' the crowd sorta disdainful, and then sa'nters off kind of swaggerin'.

I'm shook, but I has the presence of mind to let out another cat. quick. And that one reetrieves the day for us. He proceeds to take out after that disdainful rat, and lands on it in about two jumps, elic'tin' a cheer. The rat puts up a fight, but he's plumb outclassed and mighty soon demised.

That sends our stock up, and we're invited to supper, likewise to anything else we want. It's the most enthoosiastic reception I've ever been accorded, and for the next hour or so I begins to half-way accept Two-Ton's estimate of himse'f, that mebby he's a genius, after all. There ain't no sheriff up this way, no law that'd be int'rested in us, and I'm even beginnin' to think that, since there's really gold in this place, and we're so well accepted, it might be a good place to stay for a while.

Then we go back to the wagon, where the other cats were beginnin' to yowl impatient. The cat I let out last has killed three rats by then, and is bulgin' so that it can't eat no more, but is still tryin'. But nobody has seen that yeller feline, Jamaica Ginger, since it went off so important.

"You wait," Two-Ton says, confident. "When he comes back, he'll have a trophy to fit his genius. Somethin' to surprise you."

It's gettin' half-way dark, so we can't see too good. But right then he sees him comin', carryin' somethin' in his mouth.

"What'd I tell you?" Two-Ton chortles. "Here he comes!"

I looks, and I'm a little closer than the others, and gets a better look. My eyes dug out. I stares for a second, and then makes a desp'rate jump to catch that fool cat. Mebby I moved too fast, and scared him. Or mebby I moved too slow. Anyway, Jamaica Ginger jumps too, and goes through the door into the cage, which Two-Ton is just in the act of openin'. Still carryin' his trophy in his mouth.

Like Two-Ton has deeclaimed, that yaller cat ain't satisfied with common things like rats or mice. Nope, he's had to go prowlin' till he could find hisself somethin' special. He has deeloosions of genius. That cat is shore a lot like Two-Ton himse'f. He can't leave well enough alone. Has to go and fool with somethin' that looks diff'rent, no matter how little it knows of the risks.

What it's discovered somewhere is a length of fuse and a dynamite cap. I reckon some prospector had just fixed up a set of dynamite for his last chore of the day, and then moved to j'ine the meeting, figgerin' to have

a lot of dirt loose and ready to shovel in the morning. Intrigued by that layout, the cat has got hold of that fuse and cap and brought it along. There's even half a stick of dynamite still attached, which the fuse is kind of wrapped around. And the spark is gettin' close to the fuse and the cat's whiskers.

MEBBY it's the latter which makes Jamaica Ginger decide it's prize ain't so good after all. It starts to drop it, but it's too late. I'm makin' tracks for somewhere else by then, and them others, perceivin' what I has, is startin' to do the same. The cat's trophy shore has the look of catastrophe.

Which, so far as them cats is concerned, is puttin' it mild. It scarcely has that fuse out of its mouth when the cap goes off, and the dynamite with it. There's cats being distributed all around town for the next few minutes, but they won't catch no rats. Fact is, I guess the rats feasted on cat for the next couple of days.

It's shore funny how quick public opinion can change. The way it's cooled toward us is like a quick freeze up on a summer day. Folks seem to hold us as to blame for what's happened. Course, the blast does do c'nsiderable damage to the only saloon in town, jarrin' most of the bottles off the shelves and bustin' them. With the net result that there's just one thing to be thankful for. It's gettin' dark enough that me and Two-Ton manages to lose ourse'ves.

We're afoot, which ain't so good, though by mornin' we're a long way from there. And along t'wards evenin' of the next day we meets up with a hombre that looks sort of familiar. Though he's somehow changed plenty. Then we recognize him. It's the old timer we traded our worthless claim to, for a pair uh worthless cats. He looks at us, and grins, and then flourishes a wad uh bills in our face's that'd choke a cow.

"It was like you claimed," he chortles. "You dee'clared there was gold in that hole, and I hadn't dug there five minutes till I found plenty. And this mornin' I sold the claim for ten thousand dollars! Yessir, I always knowed that Jamaica Ginger and Peppermint Sticks would bring me good luck!"

THE END

A Brand New Ranger Novel

by the author of "The Texan" and "Highpockets"

You'll See These In The Movies Soon!

The Law's in Your Holster

by CLIFF CAMPBELL

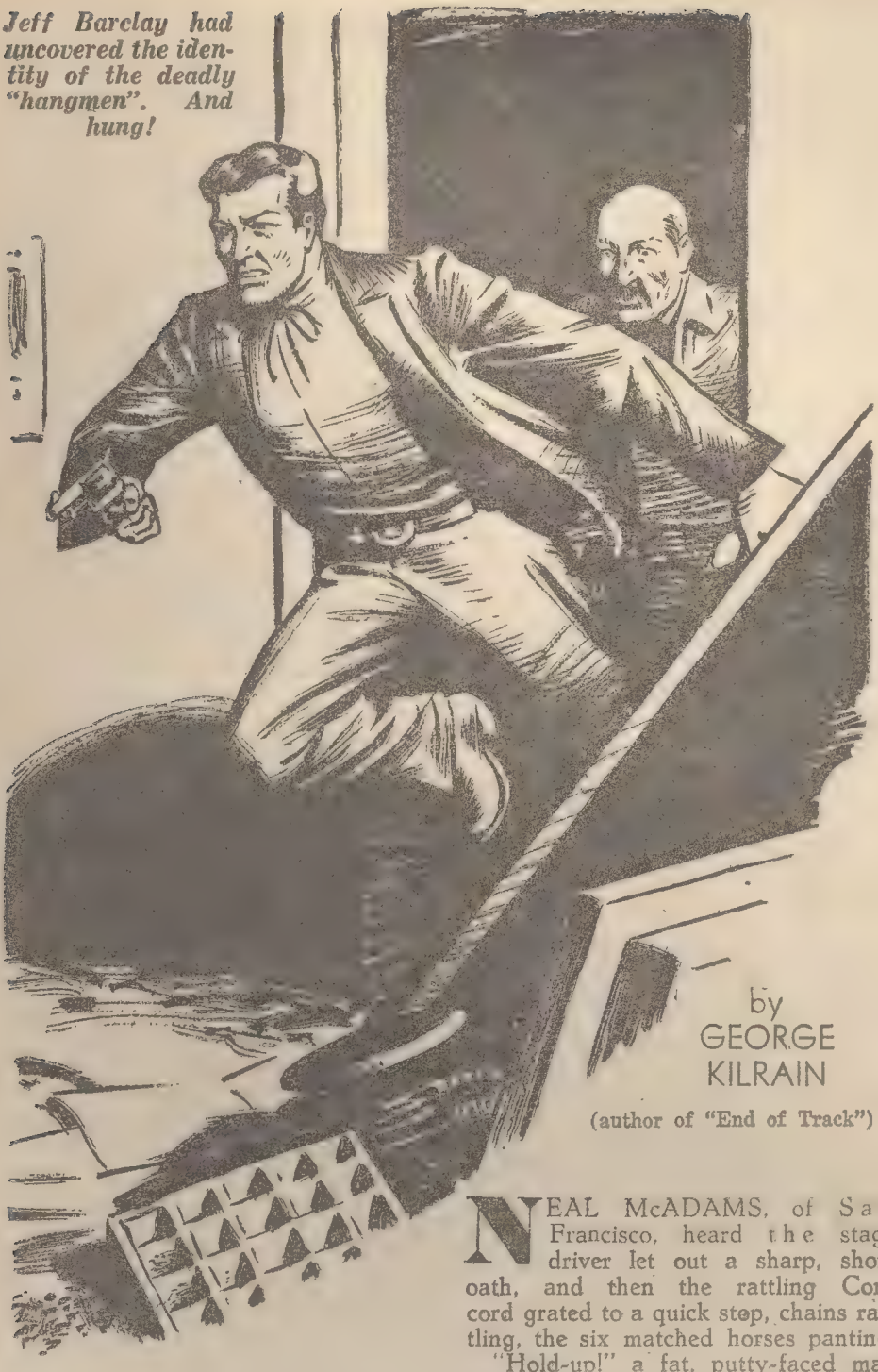
appears complete in the July issue of

DOUBLE • ACTION

WESTERN

HANGMEN OF HOLY HOLLOW

Jeff Barclay had uncovered the identity of the deadly "hangmen". And hung!



Else was going though her father's correspondence as Neal and Carr burst in.

by GEORGE KILRAIN

(author of "End of Track")

NEAL McADAMS, of San Francisco, heard the stage driver let out a sharp, short oath, and then the rattling Concord grated to a quick stop, chains rattling, the six matched horses panting.

"Hold-up!" a fat, putty-faced man groaned as he fumbled hastily for his wallet.

Neal lifted the flap from the window and peered out, blinking gray eyes in the late afternoon sunshine.

The coach had been passing down the east side of Atlas Pass, moving through the timber which grew very thickly along this section of the road.

There was a small clearing directly off the road, and the sun slanted down through the tops of the pines, lighting up the spot. It was about ten yards across. A huge oak tree grew at the edge of the clearing, one branch protruding half way across, and a man's body swung from this branch, a black mask over the face, and a small white note pinned to the coat lapel.

"Damn it!" the fat man muttered. "A hanging!"

McAdams stepped out and walked slowly after the stage driver. Back in 'Frisco, other newspaper men had warned him that Holy Hollow, the gold-mining town across the Sierras, was a literal hell on earth, and that a man with convictions took his life in his hands when he entered therein.

"That town was just cleaned out by a vigilante committee," Sam Henderson, editor of the *'Frisco Blade'* had told Neal before he left. "Now I hear it's worse than ever; you can dig all the damned gold you want on those claims, but they won't let you bring it out!"

"Jeff Barclay seems to be hanging on," McAdams had pointed out. "It'll be an experience." He'd been with the *Blade* for two years reporting local news, but the news these days all came from over the mountains. Jeff Barclay, editor of the Holy Hollow *Tribune*, had sent out a plea for assistance; the Hollow was growing, with nearly five thousand people in the town already and more piling over Atlas Pass every week. Barclay wanted another reporter to help him set up his sheet. "I'd like to go out," Neal said.

He had a letter in his pocket now from Jeff Barclay. There had been an exchange of correspondence, neither man having seen the other, and Neal had resigned his position on the 'Frisco paper for a job with Barclay. He'd been promised a job as assistant editor, and on a growing paper in a growing town that could mean a lot.

Walking toward the dead man swinging gently from the oak bough, Neal realized the reports coming out of Holy Hollow had not been exaggerated. He watched the stage driver climb up on the limb and cut the dead man down; the body collapsed to the ground with a peculiar thud, the limbs giving way as if they'd been made of rubber.

The fat man who had come out behind Neal let out a short gasp. He stopped halfway between the clearing and the waiting Concord on the road.

"He's a dead one," the stage driver growled, coming down again. He was a short man with tawny red hair and a week's growth of fuzz on his cheeks.

Neal watched him bend down and take the slip of paper from the dead man's chest and look at it. He grimaced, face turning pale under the tan, and handed the slip to Neal standing a few feet back. "Them damned hangmen are at it again," the driver said, then gave Neal a quick glance.

The newspaper man looked at the sheet. Thre was a noose crudely drawn on it, and the words, *Hangmen of Holy Hollow* directly below the noose. The stage driver bent down and slipped off the black mask for a second. He was muttering softly in his throat as he walked back to the coach and climbed to the seat.

McADAMS hesitated, and then climbed up after the driver; he was a taller man than the red-head, smaller in the waist and wider in the shoulders. They went down the road fifty yards before Neal spoke. "Vigilantes?" he asked quietly.

The driver sniffed and spat over the side of the lurching vehicle. "I wouldn't know, mister," he said cautiously, giving Neal another side glance.

McAdams rubbed a hand across his long jaw and stared at the rump of the right wheeler, amusement flashing briefly in his eyes and then sliding away. He knew that the driver was a little afraid of him now, and the fear had been engendered by this "hangman's committee".

"That chap deserve hanging?" Neal asked next. They could see evidences of digging along the sides of the gulch

as they approached closer to Holy Hollow. Here and there a miner looked up from his sluice box and waved to the driver; they gave Neal McAdams a long stare, some of them rolling tobacco in their jaws as they did so.

The driver mused a moment before replying. "Reckon Jeff Barclay had a lot o' friends in the Holler," he said then, "an' a lot o' enemies 'cause he wasn't the one to back water."

The San Francisco man stiffened. "Jeff Barclay?" he said quickly. "He the man was hanged?"

The driver nodded. "Jeff ain't got a twin," he chuckled, "so I reckon it must be him, mister." He flicked the whip at the rump of one of the leaders. "You know him?"

Neal took a deep breath. "Never met him," he said truthfully. "We've heard of the *Tribune* on the coast."

They were moving into the main street of Holy Hollow with the sun dropping down through the slot which was Atlas Pass. The town was completely rimmed in by mountains and dusk came here very swiftly, bringing with it the chill breezes from the slopes. Lights sprang up in the false front houses lining each side of the street. On the outskirts of town they'd passed many tent dwellings, but here the homes were more permanent—some of them two stories high.

Once the driver yelled to a group of men standing outside a saloon. "Jeff Barclay was strung up, mile over the Pass," he shouted. "You boys better bring him in."

McAdams could see the expressions on the faces of these miners. One man had been smoking a cigar, and the tip of it drooped. All of them gave the driver's passenger a close scrutiny, confirming Neal's opinion that the organization calling themselves the 'Hangmen of Holy Hollow' had not been identified as to members, and that every man regarded the others with suspicion.

They passed a half dozen saloons, and then the big *Alhambra Gambling House*. This building was two stories high with a porch along the entire front. Neal saw lights showing from every window, and dozens of men around the various gaming tables. The *Alhambra* had four separate swinging doors, and Neal could look over them from his perch beside the driver.

"Faro Phil Tracey runs the *Alhambra*," the driver stated. "Biggest man in town outside o' Harrison Davis."

NEAL GLANCED back, seeing a rider coming up behind the stage. In 'Frisco, Harrison Davis was reputed a millionaire, owning nearly half of the claims in Holy Hollow, richest mine field west of the Black Hills country.

The rider ran his buckskin horse up alongside the driver and Neal caught a glimpse of a wide, heavy-jawed face, a deep cleft in the chin, and a pair of slitted black eyes. All this he could see as the stage raced through the square patterns of light crossing the road.

"You find Jeff Barclay?" the rider called sharply. He was a powerful man in the shoulders, and then McAdams saw something he hadn't noticed before; this man wore a five-pointed silver star on his vest.

"The hangin' committee got him," the driver stated. "I cut him down, Buck."

Buck looked at Neal, face expressionless, then swung the buck-skin around abruptly and headed in the opposite direction.

"Buck Delano," the driver scowled. "Best damned sheriff this town ever had."

"Have many of those hangings," Neal asked softly, "without benefit of a trial?" This thing revolted him; a self-asserted committee, little more than a lynching party had taken a man from the town and strung him up. With brazen callousness they'd even signified that they were responsible for it.

"The vigilantes started the hangin' business," the driver explained gruffly, "an' then when they thought they'd cleaned up their business the 'Hangmen o' Holy Holler' start in." He added softly. "Now some o' them vigilante fellers are on the other end o' the rope."

"Barclay a vigilante?" Neal asked.

The driver pulled his animals up outside the stage station and tossed the reins to an attendant. "Jeff Barclay an'

Niles Harwood organized the vigilantes two years ago," the driver said grimly, "when this town started. Niles was swingin' from a tree up on Bald Mountain a week ago; you could see him from the center o' Holy Holler."

Neal stepped down into the dust and waited for his bag. He had the letter in his pocket from Jeff Barclay, but without Barclay there was probably no *Tribune*, and no job. He had the alternative of finding something else to do in this town, or going back to the Coast.

"Looks like they broke up Jeff's shop," the stage driver was saying. He pointed to a small one-story building directly across the road from the stage station. The windows had been smashed in; the door was open and Neal could see the overturned press inside.

Slowly, he walked across the road and looked in. Books, papers and type were strewn about the room. Benches, chairs and desks had been smashed; ink bottles thrown against the walls. A sign lay at Neal's feet, and turning it over the toe of his shoe he read the word *"TRIBUNE"* painted in black against a white background.

"Rather a shame," a man was saying at Neal's shoulder.

The San Francisco reporter turned to look into the eyes of a slender, gray-haired man with a thin, jaundiced face and a sharp acquiline nose.

"This town have no law?" Neal asked, bitterness coming into his voice. From the few letters Jeff Barclay had written to him he'd come to like the man. Barclay had ambitions; he was enthusiastic about his work, filled with the will to live. The brutal hanging had gone against Neal's grain.

"The law," the gray-haired man murmured, "is helpless against what it cannot see. Permit me," he added. "I am Harrison Davis."

Neal studied the elderly man more carefully. Davis was well-dressed in black Prince Albert coat and white shirt. He wore the old-fashioned shoestring tie. "I presume you were acquainted with Jeff Barclay?" Mr. Davis asked easily.

SOMETHING clicked inside Neal McAdams' mind. He continued to stare into the dim interior of the newspaper shop. Undoubtedly, the stage driver had been the first one to find Barclay's body, and the news could not have gone through the town as swiftly as that. The driver had called to a few men in one of the saloons; he'd spoken to Sheriff Delano, but this had happened less than a minute before. Yet Harrison Davis had asked him if he *were* acquainted with Barclay, signifying that he knew the editor was not with the living!

Davis seemed to read his mind for he said softly, "A passing rider saw the body a half hour before the stage came through; some of us have learned the facts."

Neal nodded. That information may or may not be true, but on the coast Davis had a reputation for honesty. He was too big to be crooked; a man with a million dollars worth of gold claims didn't need to stoop into the gutter.

"You knew the deceased?" Davis asked again.

"I was offered a job on the *Tribune*," Neal stated. "That job seems to be automatically cancelled." Since learning of the death of Barclay he had made no plans.

"Ah," Davis murmured, "a newspaper man." He added, "Holy Hollow respected Jeff Barclay, but evidently some of its citizens did not appreciate his bluntness; he'd threatened to expose the 'hangmen society."

"From what I hear," Neal said dryly, "that should have been done a long while back."

Davis nodded soberly. "No town can remain a town without proper respect for the law," he said.

McAdams thought about Buck Delano; the Sheriff of Holy Hollow seemed to be a pretty tough character.

"Would you care to have a drink to the memory of our mutual friend?" Harrison Davis asked. "Mr.—?"

"McAdams," Neal said slowly. "New editor of the *Holy Hollow Tribune*." He saw a daguerreotype lying on the floor of the print shop, face down; picking it up, he stared at an excellent picture of a young girl. She

seemed to be about sixteen years of age, flowing brown hair, a well-shaped nose, and a slight smile around the corners of the mouth.

"Jeff Barclay had a daughter back east," Davis observed. "The last I heard of her she was coming out here for a visit. Must be at least twenty-one by now."

Neal placed the picture on the top of the battered old Washington press. Doing so, he noticed some of the type had been set. Barclay had probably been ready to publish his weekly when Death called upon him in the form of the "hangmens' society" of Holy Hollow. The hand-press was wrecked completely, but these few lines of type had been preserved, the marauders probably not thinking them of any interest.

"We'll have our drink," Neal said. He was thinking of that type, and making a resolution to examine it more closely at the first opportunity.

They walked up the street slowly, Harrison Davis in deep thought, hands clasped behind his back. "You believe you can run the *Tribune?*" he asked once.

"I can try," Neal observed; he saw Jeff Barclay's body swinging from the oak limb up near Atlas Pass, and shuddered, thinking that it was not a nice way to die.

"I am interested in mens' motives," the rich man said suddenly. "I can be of great assistance to a young man like yourself, Mr. McAdams. Why do you want to revive the *Tribune?*"

"Every reporter would like his own paper," Neal said.

"That all?" Davis asked.

"For the present," Neal told him quietly, "that is all." He thought of that picture on the battered hand press in Jeff Barclay's office, and he knew it wasn't. The editor of the *Tribune* had understood there could be no paper and no peace in Holy Hollow until the unholy 'hangmen' were destroyed; he'd been engaged in exposing them when they caught up with him. The leadership of this crusade, the dead Jeff Barclay had passed on to the man who would be his successor.

2

HARRISON Davis led the way into the gaudy *Alhambra Gambling House*, walking quietly between groups of men and around card tables till he came to the bar. Neal McAdams observed the deference with which the citizens of Holy Hollow treated the elderly gray-haired man.

At the bar, men parted to make room for them, and one of the white-aproned bartenders hurried down, sweeping a special bottle from the shelf and setting two glasses beside it.

Mr. Davis poured the drinks unhurriedly while Neal studied the big room in the mirror behind the bar. Faro Phil Tracey had seven men working behind this eighty foot long mahogany bar. A red-carpeted staircase led to the second floor from where Neal heard the whirr of the roulette wheel, and the voice of the keno man calling the numbers in bored tones.

A pudgy, smiling man came down the stairs, thin black hair parted in the middle. He stood on the last step from the bottom, hands in his pockets, baby blue eyes taking in the scene with real relish. He seemed a harmless man except for his mouth, had a small stub nose and a round face, but his mouth was a thin slit and it smiled too much.

Neal watched him as he walked through the crowd on the floor, stopping a moment to talk to a man, and then coming again toward the bar.

Davis turned as this small man came up, nodded politely.

"Phil Tracey," the rich man murmured. "Meet Mr. Neal McAdams—the new editor of the *Tribune.*"

Faro Phil held out a fat hand and Neal was surprised at the strength in the man's grip; plenty of muscle lay in this pudgy man's small body. There was a flicker of interest in the gambler's eyes, then his face was a smiling mask again, revealing nothing. "Any friend of Mr. Davis is a friend of mine," he said cheerily; "we wish you

more luck than poor Jeff Barclay had."

"It seems," Neal observed, "that Mr. Barclay had no luck at all."

Davis held up his glass. "To the *Tribune*, he stated. Over the top of his glass McAdams caught a glimpse of Faro Phil's eyes. He thought for a moment that he saw amusement written in them, but he could be mistaken.

"No man can put down in words," Faro Phil said, "what this town owes to Mr. Davis. He set me up in this place when I had nothing: he's built the only school Holy Hollow possesses; the men working in his mines receive the highest wages in the diggings."

Neal nodded, thinking how strange it was that a philanthropic man should build a school and then support a gambling house. He wondered how many other enterprises Harrison Davis had his hand in. From the respect with which the townsmen treated him, many owed him much, and all owed him something.

A drunken cowboy at the far end of the bar seemed to be engaged in heated controversy with one of Tracey's bouncers. The puncher, a lank, red-haired man with a grinning, freckled face was insisting that he be permitted to remain at the bar even though his money was gone. The bouncer, a husky chap in a checkered suit which bulged at the shoulders, had him by the arm and was helping him toward the doorway. There was a small grin on the bouncer's broad, bony face as if he enjoyed his work and wished it would get rougher.

Playfully, the cowboy tried to break away and go back to the bar. The bouncer had been waiting for this; he lashed out with his left fist, catching the puncher full in the mouth and splitting his lips.

All the good humor left the drunken cowboy. He'd been knocked against the bar a few feet away from where Neal was standing, blood spurting from his mouth. The bouncer went after him again, fists cocked, pleasure written in his small snaky eyes.

The cowboy muttered an oath and rushed forward, unsteady on his feet. He missed a wild punch at the bouncer's head, and then was smashed in the mouth again. The bouncer spun him around and rammed a hard fist into the cowboy's stomach, taking all the wind out of him, and knocking him against the bar a second time. Not satisfied with this, the bouncer, knowing he had an audience now, came in again, raining blows into the red-head's ashen face, cutting him badly.

Watching the scene, McAdams realized how unnecesary all this was; the cowboy could have been persuaded to leave the place without any fuss if he'd been handled rightly.

"Take it easy, Gus," a man called worriedly.

Faro Phil Tracey had turned and was leaning his elbows on the bar, making no move to interfere. Davis held his glass in his right hand; Neal felt the man studying him as he watched this unequal fight. Davis was trying to get his measure for reasons peculiar to himself.

Gus, the bouncer, hit the cowboy once more in the stomach, doubling him up. He came in then, fighting close, bringing his knee up viciously.

Neal had seen enough. "All right, Gus," he grated, taking two steps forward. He was the same height as the bouncer, but not as heavy in the waist; in San Francisco he'd boxed with men who had fought the Benecia Boy, had learned some of the rudiments of the pugilistic art.

GUS SPUN around at this new threat, not knowing that Neal had been talking with the owner of the *Alhambra*. He threw a heavy fist for Neal's face and missed as the San Francisco man pulled back his head.

As the bouncer tumbled forward Neal ripped up with his left and then his right fists, catching Gus both times in the face. As the bouncer straightened up, dumfounded, Neal rushed into him raining a half dozen more blows into the man's face, knocking him against one of the card tables.

Gus let out a terrific roar and came back, trying to get under Neal's guard and catch him around the waist; the reporter caught him with a right upper-

cut which nearly tore off his left eyebrow.

Gus squealed from the pain and staggered away, clutching at the eye with his left hand. He tried to steady himself against the table, and he stood there uncertainly, still on his feet, but the fight taken out of him by the smooth-shaven, gray-eyed stranger from the coast.

"You handle your fists well, Mr. McAdams," Faro Phil smiled. "Gus is the best bouncer I have."

"The fight was uncalled for," Neal told him stiffly; "that cowboy didn't come here for trouble."

"Lot of men run into it," Phil Tracey chuckled, "whether they will or not. Then there are others who go out of their way to find it." He added. "They usually get worse than a beating with fists."

"They hang, I suppose," Neal smiled coldly.

Faro Phil grinned. "That has happened," he admitted.

McAdams turned to the cowpuncher and took him by the arm. The man was still sick from the brutal pounding he'd taken in the stomach.

Davis had opened his wallet as Neal walked past with the puncher. He slipped a bill into the drunken man's shirt pocket, looked at Neal, and said, "He'll need a room tonight."

"Thanks," the reporter said. Many men had seen the action by Harrison Davis, and Neal heard them murmur as he walked toward the door with the red head.

Faro Phil strolled after them, touching Neal's arm as they came to one of the four doors. "Let there be no ill feeling between us," he said, "because of this; you're a friend of Harrison Davis."

McAdams turned around and looked down at this small pudgy man with the smiling face. "I respect every man," he stated, "until I learn that he is not worthy of that respect."

Phil Tracey nodded. "We are of like sentiments," he observed.

NEAL WENT out with the puncher, led him up the street toward a hotel he'd noticed on the way in. A squat heavy-set man rode by on a buckskin horse and gave Neal a long glance, his face half-concealed in the shadows. The man wore a star on his vest, and McAdams instinctively knew that this man was the third strongest man in Holy Hollow; the two strongest he had met a few minutes before.

Neal sat on the side of the bed in one of the bedrooms in the big Jefferson House. He watched the cowboy slouched in a chair across the room. The sickness having left the man, he was a little more sober. "Reckon I was takin' it, mister," he mumbled through battered lips. Neal had helped bathe his face with water and he was more presentable now.

"You bucked the wrong party," Neal told him. "There's no humor in that Gus."

"I'll put some in him," the red-head vowed, "before I leave this town, friend." He looked at Neal queerly. "I don't know you, mister," he said then; "you didn't have to step in."

Neal McAdams shrugged. "I like a fight," he observed. "A fair one. That was not it."

The red-head rubbed his jaw and nodded. "Any time Riley Carr can give you a lift, mister," he said, "let me know."

"All right," Neal smiled. "Better get some sleep." He reached for his hat just as a knock sounded on the door. A small, dried-up little man with a high, stiff collar came into the room. He was dressed in black and he had a legal air around him, confirmed by the small leather bag he carried with him.

"Mr. McAdams?" he asked.

Neal nodded. The little man was very stiff, water blue eyes staring at him from behind thick-lensed spectacles; he had a weak chin and a red nose.

"I am Erwin Cannon," he said pompously. "Attorney for Jeff Barclay. Mr. Barclay left his last will and testament with me a week before his untimely death."

"News travels fast," Neal said.

Erwin Cannon sniffled. "I had anticipated Mr. Barclay's death for some time," he commented. He slid a sealed envelope from his brief case and hand-

ed it to the reporter. Riley Carr watched all this from the chair across the room, saying nothing.

When Cannon went out Neal tore open the envelope and read the brief note. It was addressed to himself, and in the event of the writer's sudden death, all property owned by the Holy Hollow *Tribune* should be passed on to one, Neal McAdams, if he would assume the editorship of the paper. Neal smiled, thinking of the battered shop. There would be very little that he could salvage out of that wreck.

"Good news?" Riley Carr asked.

"I could be weaving my own noose," Neal said dryly. "Time will tell." He went out on the street again and walked toward the *Tribune* shop, remembering to purchase a few candles before he went in.

Setting two lighted candles on a broken chair, he tacked a few old copies of the *Tribune* across the windows and then managed to close the door. Carefully, he examined the battered press, finding only that small section of type which was not broken up. He slid it out, inked it, and then pressed a square of white paper to the surface. The words came out, blurred, but readable.

Neal carried the paper to the candle and studied it.

Three men lead this devilish organization, Jeff Barclay had written. *Their names are—Sheriff Buck Delano, Faro Phil Tracey, and—*, Neal McAdams stared at the third name. A six-gun cracked outside, the slug ripping through a corner of the paper across the nearest window, grazing Neal's cheek, and smashing into the opposite wall of the room.

NEAL LEAPED for the door and threw it open. Then, realizing his helplessness, being unarmed, he flattened against the wall, hearing a man's footsteps on the boards outside. He drew back his fist and was prepared to smash it into the face of the intruder when Buck Delano stepped into the dim light, gun in hand.

"I heard a shot," the sheriff rasped. "Anybody hit?"

"I'm alive," Neal observed. He stared at the heavy Navy Colt in Delano's big hand, wondering how many cartridges were still in the cylinders.

"Prowlin' around here," Delano said next, "you're liable to get into trouble, friend. This ain't your property."

Silently, Neal handed him the letter Jeff Barclay had written before he died. There was nothing in it of a suspicious nature. Possibly at the time the editor of the *Tribune* had written it, he hadn't proof of the ring-leaders of the hangmans' society.

Neal still had in his hand the slip of paper on which he'd printed that single statement of the last editorial written by Jeff Barclay. Folding the slip carefully, he placed it in his pocket. Looking up, then, he saw Buck Delano's beady black eyes staring at him over the letter.

"Kind of a risky job," the sheriff observed, "seein' what Jeff got."

"I'll expect the cooperation of the law," Neal said softly.

"You'll get all the damned cooperation everybody else gets in this town," Delano rasped, sensing a slight.

"How many men did the 'hangmen' murder the past six months?" Neal asked him, "And why aren't they exposed?"

"We're on their trail," the Sheriff growled; "it'll come soon enough."

"How did they get in here?" Neal asked next, "In the center of town without being seen and stopped?"

Buck Delano's jaw protruded. "You're askin' a damned lot o' questions for a man's only been in this town an hour," he stated. "The 'hangmen' broke in last night when I was over in Morgantown; they smashed Jeff's shop an' took him along with 'em."

"Nobody recognized?" Neal wanted to know.

"They wear masks when they work," Delano snapped.

"Which suggests," Neal told him, "that they're known in this town."

Sheriff Delano laughed raucously. "You point 'em out to me, mister," he chuckled, "an' I'll get 'em."

"That might happen," Neal McAdams smiled, "sooner than you think, Sheriff."

Delano gave him a long, searching stare, and then went out. Neal waited

till he heard the man's footsteps die away, then, taking the slip of paper from his pocket, he studied it again and held it over the candle flame.

After that he broke up the piece of type from which it had been printed, destroying evidence that the 'hangmen' were known. He was sure Jeff Barclay had intended to print that evidence also along with his accusation, but the 'hangmen' had reached him a day too soon.

Rummaging around in the piles of papers and letters on the floor, Neal picked up a small sheet which had caught his eye. It was a replica of the sheet which had been pinned to the dead Barclay's chest—a small noose, crudely drawn, but this one had Barclay's name written on it.

The slip had probably been given to the man before he died, forwarning him, but Barclay had ignored it. McAdams stared again at the picture of the girl, thinking what a shock it would be when he arrived in town to learn that her father had been hanged.

3

CARR was sleeping soundly when Neal returned to the hotel. In the morning he was gone when Neal awoke, but he came in while the reporter was shaving, a small grin on his face and a cut on his cheek. His knuckles were bleeding and he waited till Neal finished before washing them in the basin.

"Had a little run in with a friend," the red-headed puncher smiled.

"Gus?" Neal asked softly.

"It could be Gus," Carr murmured. He sat down on the chair and studied the tall man carefully. "Heard a little talk about you, mister," he said. "I'm thinkin' you're gonna need friends in this town."

"All men need friends," Neal McAdams stated.

"You're buckin' a tough outfit," Carr said. "I hear the boys that got Barclay will be lookin' for you if you try to run that paper."

"I'm running it," Neal said.

Carr grinned. "I was figurin' on leavin' this town," he said softly; "reckon I'll stay around now for the fireworks."

"You might be putting your neck into a noose," Neal observed. "Think it over."

"You didn't do much thinkin' last night," Carr said, "when you busted into that Gus chap."

Neal made the rounds that morning, learning that there was another hand-press stored in a warehouse in Morgantown. The press had been shipped over the past months before by a certain Dobbs Hartley, a newspaper man. Hartley had died in a drunken shooting fight and the press had never been used.

McAdams took a good look at it, made his bid, and then had the machine brought into Holy Hollow by a bull train. The press came in at dusk that night and a crowd of men stood outside the *Alhambra Gambling House* watching it.

Faro Phil Tracey ambled over and stood in the door as the bull-whackers unloaded the heavy equipment. Neal and Riley Carr had cleaned out the shop and were ready to do business. "You work fast, McAdams," Tracey grinned.

Neal smiled. "I expect to have a paper out in three days," he stated.

"This town will be interested in seeing what you have to say," the gambler told him.

"I hope," Neal said, "they are not disappointed." This man, he knew, and Delano, were involved in the 'hangmens' society'. But there was no proof and he could make no statements in his paper until there was evidence.

The late stage moved past them, and Neal caught a glimpse of a woman's face in the window. The face was familiar. He heard the lawyer Cannon say, "That looks like Jeff Barclay's daughter."

The crowd around the entrance to the shop watched the stage wheel into the station. "It'll be your job, Mc-

Adams," Cannon said, "to meet her."

Neal grimaced. He was preparing to cross the road when the girl, after having asked a question of the stage driver, started over herself.

The bullwhackers had just finished their job and Neal paid them off. The crowd watched curiously as Jeff Barclay's daughter walked to the door.

Looking at her pale face, Neal realized she'd already heard the news, possibly from the stage driver, or in Morgantown through which the stage had just come. "You are the new editor?" she asked quietly.

Neal nodded. This was an older girl than the one on the picture, and a girl with bitterness in her heart which reflected in a pair of violet-blue eyes.

"Come inside," Neal told her. Riley Carr scratched his red hair as they entered, looked at Neal, and then left.

"Who did it?" the girl asked slowly.

NEAL HAD offered her a chair but she stood in front of him, reaching to his shoulders, figure stiff as a ramrod. There was no sign of breaking in this girl, and Neal warmed to her immediately. He'd anticipated a weeping scene from this eastern girl, but she had fooled him.

"We don't know as yet," the reporter explained. "I arrived in Holy Hollow last night. Your father had written to me in San Francisco." Briefly, he told her of the exchange of letters. "Your father was influential on a vigilante committee which cleaned out this town a while back," he explained. "Evidently, they didn't get the ringleaders, and these men have organized again to destroy their persecutors."

"They are not known?" the girl asked quietly.

"Not for certain," Neal McAdams said. "I feel that there is something bigger behind this syndicate than mere vengeance."

"You intend to track them down?" Miss Barclay asked.

"I do," Neal acknowledged.

"Then I should like to help you," the girl put in simply. "I could help you in the office."

"You have nothing back east?" Neal asked.

"I left everything," Miss Barclay explained; "I had intended to live here with father."

"I'm very sorry," Neal said. "No man could deny you the right to take part in this fight if you feel you ought to."

Riley Carr came in after the girl had gone to the hotel. The tall puncher sat on a box of type and looked at the floor.

"You carry a gun, McAdams?" he asked finally.

"No," Neal told him.

"I'll get you one," Carr smiled. "Those bullwhackers are makin' bets now that they have to cart this stuff back in less than a month."

"In this town," Neal grinned, "they'll find few takers."

He had his first sheet on the streets of Holy Hollow in four days, and the paper carried a half page account of the murder of Jeff Barclay. Neal had taken pains to get all the facts as there had been witnesses to the smashing of the shop, and the abduction of the editor.

There was a strong demand in the editorial that the 'hangmen' should be made to pay for their crimes at the earliest moment; he hinted that if Sheriff Delano could not maintain order in Holy Hollow that another man be given the position.

Delano appeared at the door twenty minutes after Carr had deposited a batch of papers at the *Alhambra*. The sheriff carried a copy of the 'Tribune' in his pocket, and his face was red under the tan.

"You after my job, friend?" he demanded when Neal came over to the desk.

"I'm after the thieves and murderers," Neal McAdams smiled, "who gang up on innocent men. I presume you're not one of them."

"You're askin' for trouble," Delano scowled; "I was elected sheriff of this county."

"If the 'hangmen' are not broken up before the next election," Neal said sauvely, "I'm fighting tooth and nail to see that you don't get reelected."

"I'll remember you at election time," Delano grated. "Nobody asked you to come to this town, bucko."

"I'm here," Neal smiled, "and I'm here to stay."

"Unless a bullet puts you down," Delano told him grimly. He was walking toward the door when Neal McAdams murmured,

"Or a noose, Buck?"

The sheriff of Holy Hollow spun around quickly, fear slipping into his dark eyes for a brief moment. Then it was gone, and Buck Delano scowled. "If you rate a noose, friend, maybe you'll get that."

HARRISON Davis met Neal outside of the Alhambra House that night, a smile on his face He held out his hand and shook Neal's warmly.

"Congratulations on that editorial," the rich man said. "It equals anything Barclay could do. Any time you may need a loan to expand your paper, or you are looking for a new location, see me."

"I will," Neal said.

"A fine man," Riley Carr murmured when the rich man passed on.

"Yes," Neal McAdams said. He went into the *Alhambra House*, feeling the bulge at his right side. Carr had come in that afternoon with a small Smith & Wesson .38 calibre revolver, insisting that Neal carry it with him. The lean puncher always had his own heavy Colt six-gun strapped at his right side. "You'll never know when they're gonna make a play," Farr pointed out, "an' I hope to be in it, but maybe I won't."

Tracey stood at the end of his bar, shoulders bent over the '*Tribune*' as Neal came in. The huge pile of papers Carr had deposited on the bar were practically gone.

Faro Phil smiled as Neal came toward him. "Have a drink on the house, McAdams," he said; "I like your style."

"The style," Neal observed, "is not as important in this town as the contest."

"True," Tracey admitted. "We all regret the crimes of the hangmen."

"Yet no one does anything," Neal stated blandly. "Why hasn't a vigilante committee been organized here?"

"Maybe," Faro Phil told him, "they remember what happened to the last one."

"There'll come a day," Neal McAdams said, "when they'll forget."

Faro Phil's eyes lifted "May we both live to see that day, McAdams," he smiled.

Neal was smiling to himself as he went out into the night again with Riley Carr at his side. "That man," Carr growled, "I don't like. Give me a chap smiles less." He was making a cigarette on the steps when a shot sounded from within the building. Quickly, Carr jumped to the side of the door, pushing Neal toward the other end of the porch.

A man burst through the second swinging door, gun in hand. He was a small man with short legs and a wide-brimmed sombrero pulled over his eyes. Neal caught a glimpse of a scarred, wolfish face and slanted eyes.

The stranger raced for a sorrel horse standing at the end of the hitching rack. Swinging into the saddle, he whirled the gun, pointing it directly at Neal standing in the shadows.

The reporter leaped back and fumbled for the Smith & Wesson inside his coat, knowing that he'd never get it out in time. A gun cracked from the other end of the porch and the man in the saddle cringed, the muzzle of his gun drooping.

The sorrel horse jumped at the sound, unseating the rider and tumbling him into the dust. Gun in hand, Riley Carr came down the steps with Neal after him.

The stranger writhed a few times, blood staining his shirt front where Carr's bullet had gone through. McAdams picked up the gun which had slipped from the man's hands. It was a Remington with a pearl handle.

The crowd surged out through the doors, staring at the two living men and the one dead one Then Faro

Phil pushed his way through easily, hands in his pockets. "You all right, McAdams?" he asked. "This chap broke into one of the poker rooms and got of with a couple of hundred dollars. I reckon he thought you were trying to stop him."

Neal didn't say anything, but Riley Carr smiled openly. "Kind o' had eyes in the back o' his head," the red-haired man commented.

Neal touched Carr's arm and they walked down the street.

"Anybody know this man?" Faro Phil was asking: A buckskin horse plunged up the center of the street, and Riley Carr chuckled.

"Some day that man is gonna come on time."

"That day," McAdams observed, "he'll lose his job."

Carr shook his head. "You were set up, Neal," he said. "Those boys are after yore hide an' they'll never stop till they have it."

"Glad you were along," the reporter smiled. "I never did get that gun out of my belt."

"Keep it," Carr said, "where it's more handy. I'm thinkin' you'll be needin' it from now on."

PASSING on the opposite side of the street they saw a light burning in the office of the *'Tribune.'*

"They're in!" Riley Carr muttered.

Neal slipped the gun from his belt and ran across the street, Carr at his side. Grasping the door knob, he pushed in the door, leveling the gun on the nearest object.

Elsa Barclay was sitting on the floor near one of the big file cases, going through some of her father's correspondence which Neal had salvaged. The reporter saw the tears in her eyes.

Carr slid off his hat and back toward the door awkwardly. McAdams put away the gun. "Sorry to frighten you," he explained. "We saw the light."

The girl nodded. "I suppose they'll come for you, too, Mr. McAdams."

"I expect to be waiting," Neal told her. He looked at the old letters, seeing one in his own handwriting.

"My father was a fine man," Miss Barclay half-sobbed. "I never got to know him well. I was in school and he always had his newspaper. That was his life—here and in other towns.

Neal helped her from the floor. "I think you'd better go back to the hotel," he said quietly. This was the first time he'd seen her lose control of herself, and he liked her all the more for it.

Carr waited outside while Neal walked across to the hotel. When the reporter came back, the red-headed man said,

"What's next? Them hombres made the first move an' I'm thinkin' we should make the next."

Neal McAdams grinned. "We'll have a talk with the lawyer, Cannon," he said, "tonight."

* * *

They found Erwin Cannon in his office, a dim lamp over his desk. He stood up when they came in, the light playing on his cavernous face.

"Mind answering a few questions, Mr. Cannon?" Neal asked him.

"If they're pertinent," Cannon smiled.

"Who will the hangmen go after next?" Neal wanted to know.

Irwin Cannon shrugged. "A hard question," he murmured.

"Who else was on that vigilante committee?" Neal asked him, "the ringleaders?"

The little lawyer sat down at his desk again. "They got Jeff Barclay," he said, "and they hanged Niles Harwood. George Brian was shot over in Morgantown two months ago, but it can't be proven the hangmen were behind that."

"Who else?" Neal persisted.

Irwin Cannon smiled and toyed with a pencil. "You're on the wrong track, young man," he explained. "Leroy Banks and big Bill Edson were hanged by the hangmen less than a month ago; neither of those chaps were in this town when the vigilantes were running loose."

Neal McAdams stared. He looked at Riley Carr.

"Ever stop to think why the vigilantes were organized?" Cannon asked softly. "That's your answer."

"You know it," Neal urged. "You were here."

"Barclay knew it," Cannon said, "Niles Harwood knew it; Brian knew it. Every time a miner struck it rich up along the gulch he was murdered and somebody was ready to file second claim. Leroy Banks and Bill Edson were supposed to have the richest diggings in the Hollow. Who has them now?"

"Harrison Davis," Neal guessed grimly.

"No," Cannon said. "A chap named Lewis in Morgantown." He was looking at Neal queerly. Even Carr had turned to stare at his friend.

"I thought Davis owned most of the rich claims up here," Neal said evenly.

"Most," Cannon explained. "Not all." He started to pace the room. "This is the way I've figured it," he said. "Jeff Barclay and the vigilantes broke up the combination of men who were murdering the miners with the richest stakes and grabbing their claims. Jeff and the boys hanged a half dozen of the bunch, but the big fish got away. They're back now, getting the ringleaders of the vigilantes first so they won't start again, and then moving in on the miners."

"Who has the best stake in Holy Hollow now?" Neal asked.

"Jack O'Doyle," Cannon said quietly. "He found a white paper tacked on his door this afternoon. It had a noose draw on it and his name below."

Neal McAdams stood up. "What is Jack doing?" he asked.

"Taking the morning stage over the pass," Cannon said. "He's scared stiff, but he doesn't want to lose his claim. He figures if he stays away for a few months the threat will pass over."

"We'll see O'Doyle," Neal stated. Cannon gave him instructions how to reach O'Doyle's cabin at the end of the hollow.

4

CARR HAD his own horse stabled at Moore's, and Neal rented a horse for the occasion. They were outside Jack O'Doyle's place in twenty minutes. A light shone under the crack of the door.

Neal called loudly, "O'Doyle."

There was a muttered oath, and then a rifle barrel was poked through a chink in the walls. "I'm killin' the first damned man comes near," O'Doyle roared.

Neal grinned. "I'm McAdams of the *'Tribune',*" he said. "We want to talk."

O'Doyle hesitated a moment. "Light," he said then.

The two men slid out of the saddles and O'Doyle slid a bolt from the door, opening it cautiously. "I hear you got a note from the hangmen," Neal said as he went in.

"They ain't gettin' me," the Irishman rasped. He was a blocky man with sandy hair, curled at the top. He had a wart on his chin and huge hairy hands.

"You can't run," Neal said slowly; "they'll get you before you leave the country, or they'll get you when you come back."

O'Doyle slumped down on a box, mouth drooping. "I'll take some of them damned murderers with me," he grated.

"One man can't do anything," Neal observed. "We'll have to stick together, Jack."

O'Doyle looked up quickly. "Vigilantes?" he asked eagerly. "This town's been waitin' for a man with enough nerve."

"Call it that," Neal said; "we're breaking up the hangmen."

Outside they heard horsemen coming up the road, and then leaving the road to climb the slope toward ODoyle's cabin. "It's them!" the Irish miner whispered hoarsely. "It's too late, McAdams."

Riley Carr slid the six-gun from the

holster and stepped toward the door. O'Doyle dived for a corner of the room, knocked aside a few boxes and then lifted a board. Cold air rushed into the room from this opening.

"I had this ready," the Irishman muttered, "fer a long time."

"Get out," Neal said softly, nodding to Carr. "You stay here, Jack, and talk to them. We'll open up from the side."

O'Doyle's eyes were shining. "If we kin hold 'em off fer a while," he muttered, "I have a lot o' friends in these diggins'; they'll come runnin' when they hear the shots."

Carr slid through the hole and then Neal went after him. They heard the horsemen stop in front of the cabin, saddles creaking. The horses stamped restlessly, and then a man called in a gruff voice, "O'Doyle."

Neal touched Carr's arm and they circled the cabin, keeping a dozen yards away from it. Neal could make out the dark shapes gathered in front of the Irishman's door. There were six or eight or them.

The night was dark with no moon and the cold night air sweeping down from the circle of mountains around the Hollow.

"O'Doyle," one of them called again. His voice was husky.

"You kin go to hell," O'Doyle shouted.

"Break it in," another man murmured.

Neal McAdams listened carefully, trying to identify the second voice, knowing he'd heard that man speak before. Riley Carr, moving at Neal's side, suddenly stumbled over a large tin can; as he went down, he grabbed Neal's arm and pulled him down also.

TWO GUNS exploded in the night, the slugs passing harmlessly over the heads of the men on the ground. Carr swore and shot at one of the flares. Neal heard a man groan as a bullet slapped into him. He squeezed the trigger of his own gun, feeling it buck gently against the palm of his hand. Another man cried out sharply with pain.

Inside the cabin Jack O'Doyle let out a shrill whoop and then his rifle cracked. "Git 'em," the Irishman roared.

"Get out," a man called sharply. Neal heard saddles creak again and then the slap of horses' hoofs on the road. Across on the other slope lights were beginning to shine in the cabins.

"O'Doyle," a man shouted.

Jack O'Doyle flung open the door of his cabin and took a parting shot at the fleeing horsemen. One rider was on the ground. Neal could see him lying in the patch of light at O'Doyle's feet.

"We kind o' broke up this lynchin' party," Carr chuckled; "we might o' had more if my big feet didn't get in the way."

O'Doyle bent down over the still body on the ground. The man had a mask over his face and O'Doyle ripped it off. He stood up, face pale. "Damn it!" he muttered. "This is Ben Gaynor. I figured he was a friend o' mine!"

Neal looked down at the dead man. There was a small hole just below his right cheekbone, and very little blood.

"This town will learn soon enough," Neal observed, "that many men who were considered friends, were not."

Neal turned to O'Doyle. "Some of you boys ought to hole up together," he advised, "for your own protection."

"I'm stickin' in the Hollow," O'Doyle growled. "Let me know when we're startin' after these snakes."

"First," Neal told him softly, "we have to make sure who the snakes are."

They rode back to town easily, and turning into the Main street saw a rider coming toward them. Neal pulled up and waited. The horse was a buckskin, and the rider was Sheriff Buck Delano. "I heard shots at the end of the Hollow," Delano growled. "You boys come from that way?" The buckskin was nervous and it sidled around, coming up close to Neal's dabble gray.

The reporter reached out and touched the flank of the animal. It was wet with perspiration. Delano leaped forward and slapped his hand away. He didn't speak for a moment,

and when he did his voice was very cold.

"I don't like a pryin' man, McAdams," he said.

"You were riding that animal pretty hard." Neal said softly; I'm wondering which way you came, Sheriff."

Buck Delano swung the buckskin around and sent it up the road without another word.

"Voice sounded kind o' familiar," Carr drawled. "I'd know for sure if I could hear it behind a mask."

"You see what we're up against?" Neal asked quietly.

"I got an idea," Carr said.

"That's only half of it," Neal added; "this town will blow sky high when it knows the rest."

* * *

IN THE morning he met Elsa Barclay coming out of the hotel and they walked to the print shop together. There was a small white notice tacked on the front door and Neal reached up, tore it down and stuck it in his pocket.

"I'd like to see it," the girl told him.

Neal McAdams grinned and inserted the key in the lock. "Not important," he told her. "Some chaps want to see me."

"I'd like to see it," Elsa Barclay repeated. They were inside the shop and Neal closed the door. The girl was holding out her hand.

Reluctantly, Neal took the paper from his pocket and handed it to her. It was a square sheet, about four inches each way, with a noose drawn on it, and a name beneath the noose. The name was 'Neal McAdams'.

The girl sat down in a chair, the tears coming into her eyes. "I've been expecting this," the reporter smiled, "but I have a lot of friends in Holy Hollow."

"And a lot of enemies," Elsa whispered. "I'm afraid they are the stronger."

"We'll see," Neal told her. He sat down at the desk and began to write. In another half hour he began to set up type, Elsa Barclay watching him quietly. "The paper isn't due for a few days," she said.

"This is not the paper," Neal smiled. He waited till Riley Carr came in, and then they ran off a few dozen copies of the notice he'd written. Carr stared at the first one off the press, holding it up to the air. The ink was still wet.

The red-headed puncher looked at Neal and grinned. "You talk here," he murmured, "as if you know a hell of a lot more than anybody else in this town about them hangmen."

"Maybe," Neal observed, "I do." He'd written a notice, announcing a mass meeting of every Holy Hollow miner to be held that night in front of the *Alhambra Gambling House*. In the notice he stated that he had the names of the ringleaders and would reveal them in his talk.

"I reckon," Carr said, "I know one of 'em, Neal. You know the rest?"

"I'm not sure," the reporter said.

Carr scratched his head. "What in hell you gonna tell 'em?"

Neal McAdams smiled. "They're not sure either," he explained, "just how much I know. They'll have to stop me before I talk tonight, because they can't take that much of a risk."

Riley Carr was grinning. "That means they'll have to come out in the open," he stated, "where we can knock 'em off."

Neal nodded. "They'll have to come out before dusk tonight," he stated. "You ride up to the end of the Hollow and bring back O'Doyle and a dozen men. Have them ride into town singly so the hangmen won't suspect anything. Make sure every man is armed and keep them near the office. At the first sign of trouble try to take a few prisoners."

"You figure we kin make 'em tell who the others are?" Carr asked.

"We can try," Neal said grimly.

"This Lewis from Morgantown one of 'em?" Carr asked curiously.

"You'll know tonight," Neal grinned. "Start riding." He waited till Carr had left and then he took the stack of notices and walked into the street, Elsa Barclay watching him from the door.

NAIL and hammer in hand, he walked across to the *Alhambra*

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Gambling House and tacked the first notice on one of the pillars. The sound of the hammer drew men toward the porch. Neal heard them coming up. The *Alhambra* was empty at this early morning hour, but Faro Phil Tracey ambled out of the gloomy interior, hands in his pockets.

Neal nodded to him and then walked down the street to the hotel. A small crowd gathered around the notice, and Neal watched them out of the corner of his eye as they read the statement. He tacked one notice outside the hotel, another on the Holy Hollow Bank building, and several more at various spots on the main street.

Coming back towark the *Alhambra*, Faro Phil smiled at him. Buck Delano came out of his office, hastily crossing the street. He pushed aside a few men and glared at the notice.

Catching up with Neal in a few quick strides he caught him by the arm and spun him around. "You're startin' another one o' those damned meddlin' vigilante committees," he growled. "I'm the law in this town, McAdams—."

"You're the law," Neal told him softly, "until the sun goes down tonight, Delano; remember that." He walked away, leaving the squat sheriff staring after him uncertainly. Faro Phil Tracey had heard the remark and was lighting a cigar.

Tacking a notice on the wall of Moore's stable down the street, Neal saw Delano go up the steps, walk past Tracey and enter the saloon. Tracey followed a few moments later.

Harrison Davis came into the office of the *Tribune* early that afternoon, his face solemn. "I want to assure you, young man," he said earnestly, "that I shall do everything possible to assist you in this case. I stood behind Jeff Barclay on the other vigilante committee; I only regret that I'm too old to carry a gun in your posse."

"We appreciate your offer of help," Neal said. When Davis went out

(Continued On Page 88)

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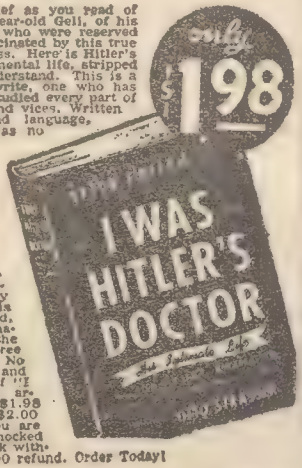

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(Continued From Page 86)

Neal walked to the window. The old man was crossing the street, walking stiffly, nodding to people, a kindly smile on his face.

Riley Carr rode leisurely past the old man, going toward Moore's stable. A few minutes later Neal saw Jack O'Doyle ride in on a sorrel horse. The Irishman hitched the animal outside the "Forty-Niner" saloon and went inside. He came out in five minutes, wiping his mouth with the back of his red flannel shirt.

"What will happen?" Elsa Barclay asked at Neal's side.

"I don't know," the reporter confessed; "I'm marking time."

AT ONE o'clock in the afternoon he went down to the claim office and spent an hour searching the books. Coming out, he saw Riley Carr lounging outside the Deuces Wild saloon. Carr looked at him and flipped a cigarette into the street.

Neal McAdams walked down along the main street. An occasional rider, moving through, stopped to read his notice, and then rode on. Before nightfall every miner in the Hollow would have the news.

It was hot and the sun was moving down toward Atlas Pass when Neal came down the street. The light was directly in his eyes and he did not see Faro Phil Tracey standing on his porch until he was nearly opposite the man.

"Have a drink," Tracey invited, "to success tonight."

Neal could see past the man, and under the batwing doors. Several men were ranged along the bar. Jack O'Doyle was standing at the corner near the Wells-Fargo building.

"This town's all behind you," Faro Phil grinned.

Neal went up the steps and pushed through the door. A man at the bar turned to look at him and then bellied up against the wood again. Amos Quinn, the town drunk, walked stiffly across the floor and Phil Tracey snapped at him, "Get out."

Quinn blinked a pair of watery

blue eyes. He was a small, thin man with a hatchet face and a bulbous red nose.

"Get out," Tracey said again, and this was the first intimation McAdams had of impending danger. It was hidden in the tone of voice Faro Phil used. He'd never spoken that way before. "Bad for the trade," Tracey stated when Quinn lurched out the first door to the right.

Neal studied the four men at the bar. With the exception of these four the place was empty, the hour being too early for the regular games.

One bartender was behind the mahogany bar and he ambled toward them when Tracey wagged a finger. He gave Neal a sharp glance; they were standing at the end of the bar out of range of the other men.

Tracey poured two drinks, set the bottle down, and then very suddenly stepped back a few feet. The door at the end of the bar opened and Buck Delano stood there, a six-gun in his hand, the muzzle pointed at Neal McAdams' chest. The distance was ten feet.

"All right," Delano rasped. "Come easy, friend."

The bartender poured the two drinks into the mouth of the bottle. Neal turned to look at the four men. One of them was walking up on him, a gun in his hand. The other three were coming behind the first fellow.

"Walk in here," Delano whispered. "I ain't talkin' for fun, friend."

Neal looked at Faro Phil Tracey. "Very clever," he observed.

The man with the gun, a sharp-faced chap with slate-gray eyes and a livid scar running down his chin from the right side of his mouth, shoved his gun into the small of Neal's back and pushed hard. He slid his hand inside the reporter's coat and took out the little Smith & Wesson.

"Game's up," Faro Phil chuckled. "You lived your day, McAdams."

Delano stepped to the side as Neal walked into the room. As the door

(Continued On Page 90)

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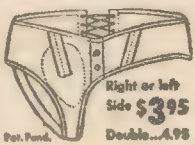

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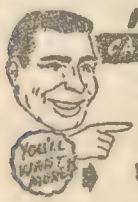

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(Continued From Page 89)

closed, the Sheriff suddenly raised his six-gun slashed the barrel against the side of Neal's head.

Neal had seen it coming and tried to step aside, but the man behind him had slashed also, and this gun knocked him to his knees. Something hit him again on the other side of the head and the room began to swim. He tried to yell to warn the men outside, but no sound emerged from his mouth. He could hear the door close and the bolt slide shut. Then Phil Tracey's voice, "Don't kill him yet, Buck."

5

HE AWOKE with the smell of hay in his nostrils and something tickling his nose. It was very difficult to breathe because there was a gag in his mouth; his hands and ankles were tied tightly and he'd been dropped in a hay loft.

There was a window up here, musty with spider webs, but it gave sufficient light. Down below he could hear voices. He was in a barn, and he surmised the barn was in the rear of the Alhambra Gambling House. Tracey and Delano had carried him here rather than risking taking him out of town in broad daylight.

Neal rolled around and managed to sit up. He felt the blood on his hands where the cord had cut into his wrists. He strained several times to loosen them and then gave it up.

From the way the sun slanted in through the single loft window he figured that little time had elapsed since he'd gone into the saloon. Riley Carr and O'Doyle wouldn't be worrying for a while.

He was sitting about five feet from the edge of the loft. Several old beams crossed the opening in front of him. There was a drop of about ten or twelve feet to the stable floor below.

Neal McAdams studied these

beams and the sight of a new rope tied to one of them sent a chill through him. Leaning forward slightly he could see a noose dangling from the end of this rope. The barn door was closed, and a heavy beam between the slots. Two men sat on barrels near the door, talking in low tones. One of them was the man with the scar Neal had seen in the saloon. The other man he didn't recognize.

The reporter edged back again. He tugged at the cords till the blood flowed freely. The man who had tied him had done a good job. Lying on his back in the hay again, he looked up at the window above him. It was ironic that the hangmen could murder him within the town limits and no one know anything about it.

A breeze had started to spring up as the afternoon waned, and it rattled the window panes gently. Looking up at them, Neal could see that one of the panes was cracked and a small piece an inch or so across had fallen out.

He studied this window a moment and then started to roll toward it. Lying on the hay he made no sound as he backed up to the window and began to feel with his fingers on the floor. That small piece of glass may have dropped to the ground outside, or it may have dropped to the floor in the loft.

His fingers closed on a sliver of glass. The piece from the pane had broken into even smaller pieces, but the edges were razor sharp.

Carefully, Neal rubbed the sliver of glass against the cords on his wrist. He felt one part and then another. With a tug he loosened the remainder of the cords and cast them off.

A man was calling softly from outside the barn door, and Neal heard the beam being lifted. Hastily, he cut the cords around his ankles and ripped off the gag. He had to rub his hands and wrists for a few moments until the circulation came back.

Faro Phil Tracey had come into the barn and was talking to the two guards.

(Continued On Page 92)

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FAMOUS WESTERN

(Continued From Page 91)

"We're to string him up here," the gambler murmured, "and then take him tonight and hang him up on the mountain where we put Niles Harwood. The whole town will be able to see him in the morning."

Neal McAdams stood up silently. He looked out the loft window. There was a small shed roof directly below, and then a drop of eight feet to the ground. This would let him into a small stable yard behind the Alhambra. An alley ran from here out to the main street.

"Bring him down," Tracey said. "We'll get it over with."

Neal heard a man's boot on the ladder leading to the loft. Lifting his own boot he kicked through the glass of the window, driving in the rotten wood holding the panes.

Down below a man yelled sharply, and Neal McAdams slid through the opening to the shed roof. Running to the edge, he was prepared to slip over the side when a man stepped out of the rear door of the Alhambra. It was Buck Delano, and he had his gun in hand.

Neal paused, knowing that up here he was a beautiful target. There was utterly no protection and he had no gun to fire back.

"Hold still," Delano called softly. "It'll be easier." He was lifting the gun when Riley Carr raced down the alley from the street.

NEAL YELLED loudly and Carr whirled, shooting wildly. Buck Delano had spun around and was taking aim when a man broke through the door behind him, knocking him forward. It was Jack O'Doyle, the miner.

Delano recovered himself and sent one shot at Riley Carr. The red-headed man's gun cracked twice and Buck Delano went down on his knees. Neal heard other men running down the alley, and then Phil Tracey calling.

"Get out."

The reporter slid off the roof. Carr was standing very still, clutching his left shoulder with his arm. He seemed ready to go down, but he managed to

(Continued On Page 94)

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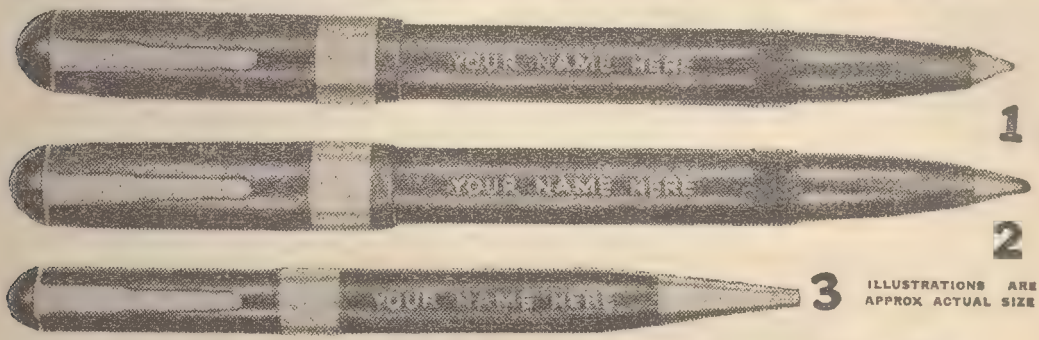

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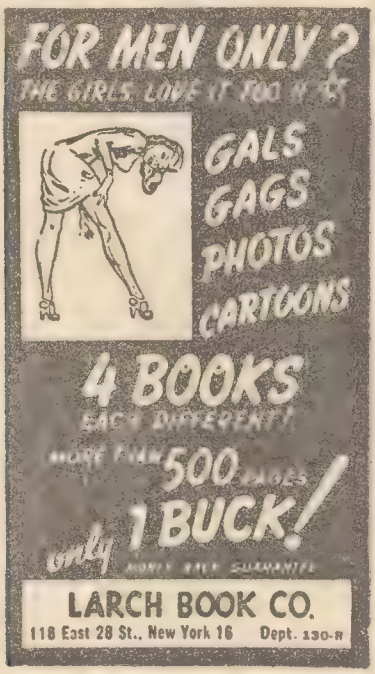

FAMOUS WESTERN

(Continued From Page 92)

grin as Neal raced forward and ripped Delano's gun from his hand. The Sheriff had fallen face forward, shot twice through the chest.

'Clean 'em out! Carr called as Neal raced around to the front of the barn, O'Doyle after him.

The barn doors suddenly opened and a blue roan shot out with the rider spurring him unmercifully. He had a gun in his hand and he snapped a quick shot at Neal as he went by. It was Faro Phil Tracey.

Neal McAdams took more careful aim, knocking his man from the saddle with a single shot just as he entered the alley. Two other men had tried to follow Tracey, but a dozen men were coming down the alley. The scarred man held his gun in his hand. He grinned at Neal and Jack O'Doyle holding him covered. Then his hands went up.

"You might save yourself a hanging by talking a little," Neal McAdams smiled.

The scarred man shrugged. "I'm no man's fool," he observed.

Riley Carr was still standing where he'd been hit, and Neal led him back into the building.

"O'Doyle had fifteen men with him," the cowboy grinned. "We saw you go in, Neal, but we didn't see you come out. I figured we better have a look."

Two of the miners had been bending over Faro Phil's body. They came up now, one man shaking his head.

"He's a dead man, mister," he explained. "You got him through the neck."

"It's easier," Neal said, "than a rope. Maybe he's the lucky one." He took Carr by the arm and helped him back into the Alhambra, after ordering O'Doyle to bring up a doctor. "I'm taking a look through Phil Tracey's private rooms," he told Carr. "I might find something."

* * *

THE MEETING outside the *Alhambra* started at eight o'clock that night. Bonfires had been lit at both ends of the street by the miners, and hundreds of them were congregating when Neal McAdams stepped

out on the porch. Elsa Barclay stood behind him. The wounded Riley Carr was sitting in a chair on the porch. O'Doyle and his fifteen stalwarts from the other end of the Hollow were grouped in front of Neal, guns in hand.

"Tonight," Neal shouted, the Vigilantes are reborn, and the 'hangmen of Holy Hollow die."

The men of Holy Hollow listened silently. Neal held a book in his hand which he'd taken from Phil Tracey's safe.

"I have here a list of the men who were in on the murders of Jeff Barclay and Niles Harwood, along with the hangings of a half dozen other good men of this town. We have a signed confession made by one of the gang, indicating the ringleaders of this group."

He stopped, noticing a slender, gray-haired man in black Prince Albert coat and shoe-string tie, Harrison Davis had arrived. Men stepped back, giving him room.

"Buck Delano and Phil Tracey are dead," Neal McAdams said. "We have taken two others prisoner. There are fifteen more men in this gang, half of them over in Morgantown. One man ruled the hangmens' society just as he ruled this town."

"Name him," a miner roared. "We'll string him sky high."

"This man gathered great wealth," Neal stated, "because he had agents buying up or annexing claims which were lost when the men holding them were hanged by the society."

Jack O'Doyle, standing directly beneath Neal McAdams, let out a short oath. "Look in the books at the recording office; the claim of every man who was hanged during the past year by the society is now registered under his name. He is the richest man in Holy Hollow, and the rottenest inside."

"Name him," a voice called again, this time more softly.

"He has over twenty murders to his credit," Neal McAdams grated, "and he is standing in our midst right now," With his finger he pointed at Harrison Davis. "There is the man. I

(Continued On Page 96)

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(Continued From Page 95)

have sufficient proof to hang him within the hour."

The crowd around the slender old man broke away, leaving him standing alone in the circle. He'd had his arms crossed, and there was small smile on his face as he uncrossed them.

"He's got a gun!" a man roared.

Harrison Davis lifted a small black derringer and pointed it at his temple. There was a muffled explosion, and the richest man in Holy Hollow sank to the ground.

Neal McAdams turned from the porch and went into the building, sickened by the sight. Elsa Barclay followed him. She touched his arm as he sank down in a chair at one of the empty card tables.

"It wasn't a pleasant thing to do," the girl murmured, "but it was a duty."

Neal looked at her. "I suppose you'll go back east," he said, "now that the trouble is over."

Elsa Barclay shook her head. "I should like to work on your paper," she told him. "It is the only link I have to my father, and I think he would like it that way."

"I would like it that way, too," Neal said simply. Looking at her he saw her face flush slightly, and he had an answer to the question in his eyes. It was the answer he wanted.

THE END

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(Continued From Page 42)

nesters like himself and Vern Browning. A cowman had been knocked down by a nester.

From this moment on—from the moment his fist had lain Hayward on the floor—there had been danger on this grass for Jim Cain. Either he or Hayward would have to go. Either leave, or die.

That was Hayward's code.

So he wasn't doing it all for Vern Browning and the girl who reminded him of Myra Clovis; he was doing it for Jim Cain and Myra Clovis. Now he glanced toward the cafe.

Myra sat on the bench in front of the cafe. She had a rifle leaning in her hands as she watched. The wind came in and dust rose in a devil-twist. And over it Jim Cain looked at Mutt Immenshank and Ed Hayward.

"Come a-walkin'," Jim Cain said.

That was all. Enough had been said.

HAYWARD glanced at Mutt Immenshank and said something the wind would not allow Cain to hear. Then boots came of the plank-walk and boots shuffled the dust.

Vern Browning's face was the color of dried ashes. "I'll take Immenshank, Jim. You're faster—" His voice was a hoarse whisper. "This had to come sooner or later, some day or night. And I'd rather have you with me than against me; hear that, Jim Cain?"

"I hear."

They moved out, Browning on the right, and ten feet separated them. They came forward, step by step. And now Mutt Immenshank and Ed Hayward had halted.

Cain had two men in the tail of his eye. One was Browning, who had gone to one knee; the other, Immenshank, who looked like a gangly spider.

Hayward said, "Two nesters at once. Luck is with us, Immenshank."

Immenshank cursed; his nerves were violin strings.

Cain murmured, "Two nesters, Hayward."

Stormy thoughts twisted Hayward's beefy face. His tongue came out, licked his wind-cracked lips. He glanced at Immenshank. The gaunt man was ready. Hayward looked back at Jim Cain.

Hayward's right shoulder dipped.

Eeler Tyler had been fast, but Hayward was faster. He was living light, moving in one co-ordinated movement. Jim Cain felt the smash of his bullet through his leg.

The blow sent the leg out, and Cain came down. But, as he went, he fired twice, the shots spaced with booming regularity. They caught Ed Hayward in the chest, tipped Hayward's next bullet wide.

It happened in terrible swiftness, yet Cain realized Vern Browning was down. He remembered Vivian Webster and his Colt talked itself empty.

Three shots found Ed Hayward, but they were wasted shots, for Hayward was going down, and the leads jerked him around before he dropped.

Jim Cain was on one knee, remembering other days, and other guns. He dropped his .45. He brought his hand up and rubbed his dusty jaw. People were moving out now and the marshal was with them.

"Browning?" Jim Cain asked.

Browning was on his feet, now. "I threw myself on my belly. That made Immenshank miss, I figure; he won't shoot again." Browning's face was still the color of dusty ashes.

Jim Cain hobbled over to where Myra Clovis sat on the bench. "Through the calf of my leg." He looked at the rifle. "Thanks, Myra."

Browning sat on the other side of her. The rancher put his head in his hands and sobbed. They waited and Myra put her hand in Jim Cain's. Finally Browning stopped.

The marshal came up. "Both dead."

Cain said, "They'd fight till they died. They were the tough kind; they saw their way and went toward it regardless."

"Hell." The marshal walked off.

Jim Cain leaned back against the wall, eyes closed, as the doctor knelt and looked at his leg. The pain in his leg was nothing compared with the turmoil inside. Myra's fingers tightened in his.

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